

**From where there are no words.**

**An autoethnographic exploration of the phenomenon of energy healing from  
the perspective of the healer.**

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Graduate Studies and Research  
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Saskatoon

By  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration of the phenomenon of energy healing told from the inner world of a healer. Briefly, this complementary and alternate medicine (CAM) modality involves the manipulation of subtle energy fields to affect health, something that I have known for over 15 years. Because energy healing is experienced differently by different people I chose to use autoethnography to capture and share my own personal understanding of this phenomenon. This methodology allowed me to delve into my intimate stories and experiences and through the writing process, I learnt more about energy healing than I had initially expected. In finding my personal voice and investigating the silence that has accompanied my relationship with this much maligned healing practice, I was able to explore the stories that had remained in the shadows: tales that had been influencing my relationship with this phenomenon for many years. This thesis also includes conversations that I had with my teachers and fellow healers. As I reflected on our discussions, I followed themes that appeared when we spoke and I discovered not only a deeper personal understanding of the phenomenon of energy healing, but a new profound awareness of myself. In the final presentation of this thesis, I have shared my discoveries as stories and anecdotes and I have surrounded these tales with my artwork. It is my hope that the colour and movement of my paint brush will help translate the emotions and sensations that I have known in places where words have trouble traversing. The experiential sense of knowing that speaks from my intimate perspective of this alternate healing modality comes from a private journey that is imbued with awe and wonder, stumbling and doubt, and an inspiring sense of connection - a perspective that is absent in the academic literature on energy healing. In sharing this inner world with my readers, I hope that my writing and my artwork have captured a small fragment of the elusive and esoteric nature of this phenomenon, something that for me exists in a place where there are no words.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my partner and best friend, JP. Without your unwavering support I would never have made it this far. Your words of encouragement never faulted as I struggled, tripped and dragged myself onwards. You allow me to be me, in the full expression of my spirit, never holding me back or doubting the perfectly flawed person who stands before you. To you I owe the world.

For my beautiful and loving children: Sebastian, Autumn and Halyn. If you could count the stars you might be close to knowing how much I love you. The three of you are my greatest and most revered teachers and I am truly honoured and blessed to be your mother.

To Mum and Dad: for all that you have given and sacrificed freely. You have always been and will continue to be, deeply loved.

To Damian: though far away, your brotherly love is a foundation that keeps me strong. Thank you for all that you are.

To Angelique: whose physical presence I have missed to depths that I can barely fathom. Thank you for your inspiration and guiding light that I have felt reach from beyond the veil.

## Preface

### Who am I?

I am sitting here in the mid-morning light, the autumn sunshine dancing through the leaves that have donned their yellow hues. The cool morning air wrestles playfully with the promise of a warm afternoon, not yet ready to give up her centre stage walk across the dew-filled grass. Hand in hand with the drama that is the turning of the seasons, I want to begin this journey by telling you a little of who I am and what has motivated me to write. I hope that this small insight might help you understand the voice that speaks within these pages. At this particular point in my life, I wear many different hats. I am a student and researcher, in the final stages of writing my master's thesis. In the process of birthing this creative venture, I am settling into the identity of writer – although, I must admit, it is a new outfit that feels uncomfortable and has yet to be worn in. My sister, who passed away five years ago, was a professional writer and I feel awkward at the thought of usurping her role within our family.

While these are the outer garbs that I spend most of my days wearing, only moments before typing these words, I was pouring cereal and making school lunches, loading a dishwasher and considering the mountain of laundry that needs to be put away. Mother to three wee ones (who aren't so small anymore) and wife to a patient man who graciously accepts the call of my laptop, I also wear these outfits for most of my waking and sleeping hours: my other identities that remain in the background of these pages.

Other costumes that I slip into when time allows are those of artist, immigrant, daughter, sister and friend. These identities have me painting and drawing when the muse takes me and missing my homeland and family with a heavy heart. As I write this thesis, I find myself stealing indulgent day dreams of surprise visits home and stubbornly grasping the grammar of my upbringing as a way to claim my culture and identity as an Australian in a foreign land.

But there is another outfit that I wear; an identity that I don't always name to strangers, something that isn't obvious like my accent or the presence of my children. And while it is as much a part of me as the facet that paints and draws, I keep it hidden under my other clothes, rarely mentioning it when I meet someone new. I am an energy healer; someone who uses intention and breath work to direct the subtle living energy of the universe with the aim of improving well being. Over the 15 years since I first felt energy<sup>1</sup> with my hands, I have taken a number of different courses and studied various energy healing modalities, including: acupuncture, Quantum Touch, Yuen method, chakra healing, and shamanic healing. While I have been practicing energy healing in some form all of this time, I still consider myself to be someone still learning about these healing practices. I have conducted my healing work in both a clinical practice and in an informal setting with friends and relatives and I am privileged enough to keep company with a group of gifted and dedicated healers. I am not, however, a full time healer with a private practice and extensive catalogue of client anecdotes. I am a writer and researcher who at this moment, has an opportunity to speak about a phenomenon that is not often explored from the insider's perspective.

The interesting dynamic behind my identification with the label of energy healer is that while I mostly keep it quiet until I have felt out my audience to gauge their response, energy

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 1-2 and 16 - 17 for a complete definition and description of energy.

healing and the world of complementary and alternate medicine (CAM) is a major part of my identity. It is responsible for shaping the paradigms and ontologies<sup>2</sup> through which I view the world and it is the lens through which I understand most things.

When I cut or burn my fingers, I think about what acupuncture meridian is nearby and what emotions are being released by my injury. When I look at my tongue, I interpret the bumps and ridges that I see as signs of a damp constitution that needs to be balanced and when I witness intense emotions in myself and others, I think about the physical manifestations and illnesses that are intimately related to these sentiments. Other signs of my alternate health perspective can be seen when I cook and I purposely send energy into the mixing bowl so that positive emotions are felt in my food. If I have a sore throat I massage the end of my thumb to stimulate the acupuncture point that governs the neck, and when I see clocks that suddenly don't keep time, I read these cues from my physical world as a reminder to take a certain homeopathic remedy. The lens that I view my reality through sees everything as energy and therefore the entire world around me is an extension of myself, affecting me and being affected by me. When I look around, I don't see division: I see a complex and integrated whole.

When I reflect on this observation and the importance of my personal alternate health perspective, I stop and ask myself a question:

“If this is how I view the world, what is it that has me guarding my identity and keeping the label of energy healer a secret?”

Is it the judgment and perception of others? Is it my own doubt over my abilities? Perhaps it is a desire to avoid the difficult discussions that bring opposing paradigms clashing up against one another. Maybe I'm afraid that I will be asked for a demonstration or proof of something that I know to be ethereal and otherworldly. Where would I even begin?

In many of my daily interactions I get a sense that western society considers the existence of energy or lifeforce<sup>3</sup> to be imaginary. When I name myself as an energy healer, I have often felt my declaration met with uncomfortable silence, confusion and occasionally, what I imagine to be looks of contempt. I often feel a shift occur in the space between myself and the person who has heard my admission, as if I now belong in a category reserved for people who are deemed to be 'different'. Sometimes I hear them say,

“Ahh, you are one of *those* people,” as their sentence trails off and their expression completes their condemnation. Sometimes they call me a “hippy” as they chuckle and turn away and I imagine the labels they haven't said out loud: “fraud, flake, fool.”

Just recently I was asked why I didn't study “normal medicine” if I was interested in health. Does that make what I do abnormal? It definitely makes me feel that there is a hierarchy of knowledge systems and what I do is deemed as being less valid or perhaps, less worthwhile.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, I use the word *ontology* when I am referring to our individual understanding of reality or our personal worldview.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this body of writing I use the terms energy, lifeforce, qi and prana interchangeably. These words draw on my training in the energy healing modality of Quantum Touch (energy), reference my understanding of energy as the lifeblood of the universe (lifeforce), and are influenced by my studies in acupuncture (qi) and yoga philosophy (prana). I intend for them to be understood as referring to the same thing.

Over the years I have had discussions regarding health with friends who have no qualms about holding back their derisive comments.

“Ah, here she goes again,” they say as they roll their eyes in contempt.

“Where is the proof? Why can’t you see an acupuncture meridian then?” they ask, falling back on positivist science to produce all evidence of their reality. These questions shut me down and silence me so abruptly that I can still recall the exact moment this one comment was uttered a decade after it occurred.

I have also heard the argument that “any positive results from energy healing are due to the placebo effect,” and instantly I feel my entire alternate perspective discounted. I’m not sure why I feel so deflated but I rarely have the inclination to argue back and defend my position. While my mind is spinning with what I might say, I remain silent with a sense that any argument I put forward will be deemed invalid before it leaves my lips.

When I think about these unspoken explanations that might defend my alternate health perspective, I often imagine what these conversations might be like. As I frame a description of energy healing in a western scientific paradigm however, there is always something missing. As I consider the studies that I have read and the scientific theories that have been presented to explain the phenomenon of energy healing I find a jarring disconnect where logical rationalizations fall short of the phenomenon that I intimately know. From my perspective the two ontological positions don’t speak the same language or operate from the same set of shared assumptions. Something is always lost in translation when a pure scientific vernacular is used. This is one of the reasons that I am exploring energy healing using the methodology of autoethnography. By using an autoethnographic voice I am able to capture the emotive description and intimate experience of energy healing that is felt and sensed, rather than writing a discourse on the scientific literature that has already been done (e.g. Hankey, 2004; Levin & Mead, 2008). These sentiments are what I feel is missing from the academic writings on energy healing. This awareness of the lack of energy healers’ personal stories in academic literature is what Douglas & Carless (2013) identify as an important initial phase in autoethnographic research. Muncey (2010) also speaks of recognizing a similar absence when she looked for her own personal story in the academic literature on teenage pregnancy. When she could not find it, she was inspired to write. As I read the research on energy healing, I found myself craving the intimate, inspired reflections that reminded me of my own energy healing work. These are the type of stories that I wish to share.

There are also other reasons that I have chosen to explore energy healing using the methodology of autoethnography. This methodology allows me to speak in my own voice allowing my creativity and personal relationship with this phenomenon to come forward. In this way, the insider’s perspective is privileged (Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1987) and the private inner world of an energy healer may be revealed: something that is difficult if not impossible to know from the outside looking in. Autoethnography also allows me to write in an evocative and emotional way (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010) so that my writing reaches out and touches my readers, affecting them and allowing them to react and relate to my stories in their own personal manner (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Gergen & Gergen, 2002; Muncey, 2010; Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006). By writing in a more evocative way I hope that my reflections open doorways that lead to understanding that is



inclusive and experiential for my audience rather than having this phenomenon described to them using a passive and detached approach (Sparkes, 2000).

Another feature of autoethnography that draws me to this methodology is the opportunity to incorporate multiple voices that are related to my various identities (Bochner, 2013; Reed-Danahay, 1987). My voice as healer, artist, writer, mother, wife, sister and daughter are all welcome to speak, reflect and share their intimate stories of this phenomenon and none of these 'selves' are left silenced on the periphery. Autoethnography allows me to explore my spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and embodied self and bring these perspectives and experiences into my writing (Bochner, 2013), ensuring that no personal vantage is left silenced. By speaking from this place of wholeness autoethnography highlights my shifting identities and it forges an academic space for my entire being (Reed-Danahay, 1987). This methodology creates room for me to speak, providing a stage where I may find my voice and hopefully come to understand why I have been silent in the past.

An additional reason that I am writing in an autoethnographic voice is that the process itself is the method through which discoveries are made (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2013; Muncey, 2010; Richardson, 2001). As Richardson (2001) explains: "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it" (p. 35). As I reflect on my own reluctance to identify myself as an energy healer to strangers and as I delve deeper into the phenomenon of energy healing through my own introspection and contemplation of the conversations that I have with my teachers, I hope to learn more about myself and this healing modality than I currently understand.

I have also chosen to use autoethnography as my methodology because it includes my personal voice as researcher. This inclusion enables me to challenge discourses and power dynamics that exist within dominant research practices (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wall, 2006). In many traditional scientific approaches the presence of the self is considered a contaminant in the research (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997; Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006). The congruence between my methodology and the topic of my exploration, which also lies outside the boundaries of dominant western biomedical practices, allows me to challenge not only *what* I write about but *how* I write about it.

As I begin this autoethnographic journey I realize that I am setting forth not only to explore the phenomenon of energy healing, but I will also be discovering my own personal relationship with this healing modality. As I recall memories and emotions, sensations and hidden knowings, I hope to learn more about why I feel silenced and why I struggle with identifying myself as an energy healer to those around me. As I consider the vulnerability that this intimate reflection entails, I purposely release the fear I have clutched tight within my fist and I think of the voices that have gone before me, carving room for stories that are not typically heard within academic spaces. Although I still worry that I may be judged, I choose not to defend myself with silence. I choose to do so with my story.

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## Chapter One: My story about energy healing

### Introduction

While the initial words in my preface speak of autumnal hues and the turning of the seasons, I now look outside at the silent sleeping trees and their acceptance of winter's frozen touch. The quiet of the ashen landscape is a perfect backdrop for personal reflection, of journeys taken and discoveries made. This thesis is the product of such a quest. For the most part, it has been a journey inwards, supported by the wisdom of my teachers. It is a portrayal of the phenomenon of energy healing as I have known and experienced it as a practitioner over the last 15 years. My aim when undertaking this research has been to increase the understanding of energy healing especially as it is recognized within academia, and to add a personal and intimate voice to the literature. I hope that a better understanding of this phenomenon will lead to an increased acceptance of this alternate healing modality. What I discovered along the way, however, was so much more than that.

Briefly, the act of energy healing involves the manipulation of subtle energy fields to affect health but my intimate relationship with this phenomenon demands a more expressive explanation. Energy healing as I have known it is a connection to the essence of life, an awareness of sensations that may be felt beyond the range of physical touch, a conscious attention to our inner knowing and perceptions, and a relationship with this life force that communicates through our intentions. The caveat that goes with this, or any explanation however, is that the act of energy healing is experienced differently by everybody and the esoteric nature of the phenomenon itself ensures that it can never be completely captured nor fully understood through words alone.

Before I really begin, I must explain my choice to use the term 'energy' throughout this body of writing. Keep in mind that this word is known by a myriad of other names<sup>4</sup>. Some of these names have roots in ancient teachings and they carry a culture of nuances<sup>5</sup> with them, floating on the breath after the word leaves your lips. Other words are a contemporary interpretation of these older expressions, attempts to capture these expansive meanings and recreate them for modern times. For what I am about to write, I need one word, a simple term that will sum up all that I have experienced and carry my memories bundled in its arms. This one word must also open the door for you, igniting your imagination whilst whispering to your own memories, recounting tales that possibly share a common thread. I ask a lot of this word, an unassuming and honest mark upon the page, simple and yet imbued with more than I can ever fully express.

That is why I chose the word 'energy'. It implies a connective force without limitations or boundaries; an electric power that is alive and mostly unseen. To understand this word and all that it implies, the common Cartesian discourse that speaks in clear parameters and absolute

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<sup>4</sup> For example: qi (China and Japan), prana (India), ki (Japan), atua (Maories -New Zealand), gana (South America), mana (Pacific civilizations), life force (modern western term), bioenergy (Europe), wakan (Lakota).

<sup>5</sup> This term refers to the cultural understandings that accompany words such as qi or prana. Not only are these words part of the vocabulary but the nuances that are an integral part of the term are also inherently understood. Western cultures do not have one specific word that is an adequate translation of these terms and even when words such as energy or life force are used, the cultural nuances that imbue words such as qi or prana, are lost.

definitions must be left behind. Energy, for me, is fluid and ethereal and more accurately described with suggestions and impressions rather than distinct classifications. The healing energy that I know is as much a part of a rock or a river as it is a person or animal. For me, it is the essential ingredient that delineates life and it is the foundation upon which all things are created. When I feel energy, a part of me recognizes it as the lifeblood that holds the universe together.

And while I have hinted at a description of energy with these words, there is another nuance that lies behind my explanation of this subtle life force. When I describe my personal understanding of energy I am constrained by the limitations of language which I feel is inadequate to describe a phenomenon that is so intimate and otherworldly. While my thinking mind can observe and contemplate as well as recall and describe my experiences of working with energy, these actions always feel as if they have arrived on the scene a moment too late. There is a slight gap, a moment when I try to translate what it is that I am feeling and sensing into words. This is because my awareness of energy comes from another part of me: the emotional, the sensitive and the intuitive, and no words exist in this realm. I must bring language to the edge of this divide, and then leave it behind to stand on the precipice, looking over and observing a domain into which it can never hope to walk. As I return with inspired sensations and emotions from my time spent connected with this universal healing energy, I can only hope that the words that have been left behind can somehow capture the delicate emotive remnants that still cling to me after my journey.

As I captured these descriptions and began to contemplate my understanding of the phenomenon of energy healing, I realized that I had a story to tell. This is when the methodology of autoethnography found me. In academia research often requires validation and objective, analytical thought processes where generalizations remove the personal subjective experiences. I wanted to tell a different story, however: one that could not be captured in numbers and data sets. To open a doorway into the world of energy healing that I have experienced, I wanted to do so with an embodied and affecting voice – one more suited to describing the touch of spirit that I feel flowing through me when I do this healing work. I couldn't find this voice anywhere in the academic literature. There were interviews with healers that were written by researchers (Cabico, 1992; Van Dragt, 1980; Warber et al., 2004) and articles written by healers (Benor, 2001; Levin, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Levin & Mead, 2008) that were analytical and scientific, but I couldn't find my story: a tale about the sensed and intuited world of energy healing based on the healer's private inner contemplations. I had fallen in love with the ability of a story to whisk you away and leave pieces of itself buried within your mind and the more that I read about autoethnographic research that utilized such stories, the more I was inspired by what it could do. This is why I have chosen to speak in anecdotes and personal reflections: so that I might hint at what I have known through the emotions that my tales inspire and hopefully leave a piece of this world with my readers to take away and contemplate in their own way.

This exploration of energy healing also includes the perspectives of other healers as I contrast my own experiences with those of my teachers. In sharing their understandings of this phenomenon with me and describing what they love about their healing work, I have been granted a small glance into the inner contemplations of dedicated and gifted energy workers. As I listened to their anecdotes, wide-eyed at the privilege of hearing such rare and private tales, I felt the quiet self-assurance in their voices that embodied decades of personal introspection and

consideration. We talked of what inspired them, what took their breath away and what they thought was the essence of energy healing. As they recounted tales, I listened earnestly so as not to accidentally drop a precious jewel of information. These illuminating conversations led me down new pathways that I was excited to explore as well as overgrown trails that I recognized but had not travelled for awhile. In speaking with my teachers, I discovered ideas and themes that I may not have discovered on my own and these discussions provided me with a greater depth of understanding than I would have reached if I had travelled a solitary path.

As I immersed myself into this personal world of energy healing, I found that not only was I inspired by the mysterious, but I also stumbled across shadows and hidden thoughts that I had not been aware of. These darker elements contained my own limitations, fears, doubt and self-imposed silencing; they represent the shadow story that lay behind my understanding of the phenomenon of energy healing. My discovery of these unspoken stories helped complete my research as I sought to discover what it was that I had held back and why it was that I was reluctant to reveal them. In sharing my tales with you now – the inspirational and the confessional – I hold out my hand and welcome you into this world, hoping that through my stories and descriptions you might get a sense of what energy healing is like from my perspective; the private inner world of an energy healer.



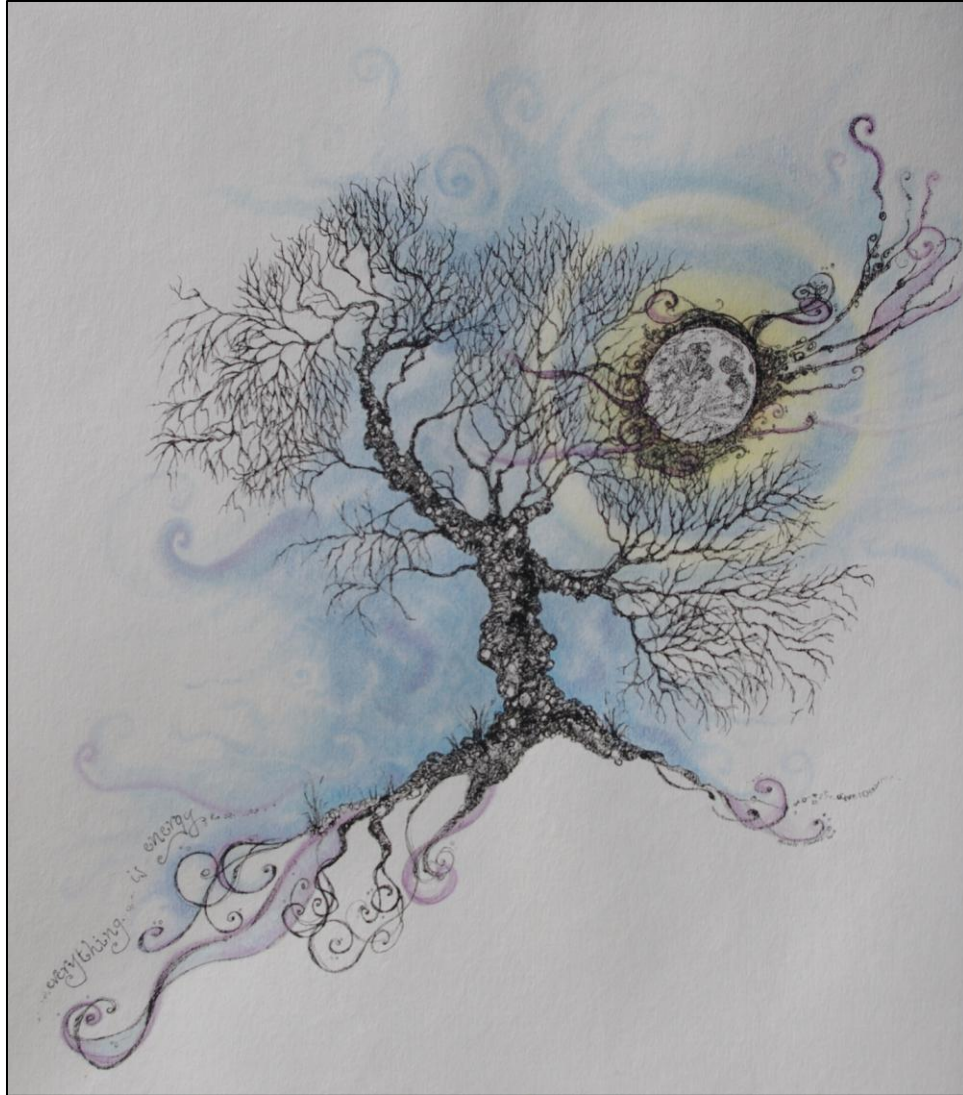


Figure 1: Michelle Flowers. 2012. *Everything is energy*. [Ink and pencil on paper].



## Beginnings

So, how does this story begin? There are many places where I might commence my tale, but the most logical, perhaps, is the time that I first felt energy. It was 15 years ago in a class that I took as part of my undergraduate program.

*As I walk towards the dance studio for my Friday morning lab class, an elective called “Mind Body Exercise,” I wonder what we will be doing today. This subject takes a broader, esoteric approach to health and athletic training than my usual anatomy and exercise physiology*

classes, which is probably why I love it so much. We have already been introduced to topics such as yoga, tai chi, and the use of visualization in training athletes, so I know that whatever we will be doing will be hands-on and different. Before I get to the door of the dance studio however, I reach up to wipe sleep from my eyes and I notice how puffy and swollen they are. As I curse the obvious sign I have been crying, I am suddenly fully aware that the tell-tale signs of last night's fight with my ex-boyfriend are blatantly obvious on my face. I duck my head down as I try to avoid the gaze of my friends that I pass in the hall, hoping no one will notice or ask me what is wrong.

As I reach the door I cringe a little further, preparing myself to spend all morning in the same room as my ex. It is pure torture that wears me down and makes me feel sick when I enter the studio. While I keep my head down, trying to walk in unnoticed, I glance up surreptitiously to see if he is already there. I find him on the opposite side of the room, smiling and joking with his friends and for a moment the weight of his good mood hits me in the stomach and I turn away quickly so he can't see my face. I instantly feel transparent and insubstantial as if someone poking a finger into my chest would rip a hole right through me. I move towards the back wall and put my bag down in a corner while I kick off my shoes, grateful that he can't see me wrestle with my emotions. I take a deep breath and ban my shredded self to the background as I pick up a false facade – a carefree Friday morning face that tells everyone that I'm fine as if nothing at all was wrong. I give myself stern instructions to ignore him completely as if he was just another guy in class and I get to the task of disregarding him entirely. I find my friends and walk over to them, smiling weakly as I distract myself with their conversation. The effort of wearing this mask and hiding my real emotions is exhausting and suddenly, I cannot wait for class to be over.

When I see my professor walk into the dance studio, I am instantly relieved. The sooner the class begins the sooner I can escape and let go of my defensive wall. As she walks across the room, I focus my attention on the expansive studio filled with floor-to-ceiling windows that allow the light to pour in. Unlike our usual classrooms, the windowless basketball courts covered in line markings and the ghosts of old ball games, this room is alive with creative potential that permeates the thick glossy floor boards under our feet. As I watch Vani<sup>6</sup> walk across the room I notice her wild curly hair and the way it contradicts the straight lines of her long pencil skirt. As her steps echo across the hardwood floors; I'm thankful that I now have something else to distract me from how wretched I feel.

"Good morning everyone," Vani greets the class as she moves through the studio to the wall of windows on the opposite side of the room. As she puts her books and papers down, I slip away from the idle chatter of my friends and turn in her direction. The sunlight pouring through the windows behind her makes me squint momentarily and the tension in my puffy eyes reminds me once more that last night's tears are still obvious on my face.

"If you would all like to move around and find a space on your own where you won't be distracted, we can begin," she says as we move straight into the first activity of the morning. Vani tells us to remain standing, so I wander off to the outer edge of the room away from my friends, glad for the relative isolation and the excuse to move away from everybody else. I turn my back to those around me so that I can hide my eyes and I sigh audibly. I feel empty and played out from the effort of just getting to class this morning and I drop my head, rubbing my

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<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym. I chose this name because it means voice.

*hands over my face. As I look down, I let my thoughts float away in the bright morning sunlight that is bouncing off the thick glossy floors.*

*“The first activity for the class this morning is an exercise in grounding,” Vani explains. “Its purpose is to focus our attention on the present moment, to let go of any distractions and to connect ourselves energetically to the earth,” she instructs.*

*I listen carefully and catch hold of the phrase about connecting to the earth. Unconsciously, I take a deep breath in as I realize this is something that I earnestly need.*

*“I’d like everyone to close your eyes and imagine a tree,” Vani says as she pauses, giving us a moment to construct the mental image. “See the tree standing there before you and imagine the root system that spreads underground, supporting it. That root system is grounding the tree, holding it in place and firmly connecting it to the earth. Now, imagine you are a tree and feel the root system that you have reaching out beneath your feet, connecting you to the ground below you,” she says, pausing to let the intent of her instructions ripple throughout the room.*

*“Think about the stability, centeredness and groundedness that you feel when you connect to the earth via these roots. Take a few deep breaths while you focus on this connection and then open your eyes and bring your attention back to me,” Vani says as the quiet in the room reflects the calming effect of her words.*

*I close my eyes and readjust my feet making sure that I feel balanced and then I take my first deep, centering breath. I set my mind to imagining a giant old gum tree with its ancient roots buried deep within the earth. It feels strong and solid: a not-going-anywhere kind of feeling that is the opposite of how my morning has been going so far. I follow Vani’s instructions and imagine I am that tree, stalwart and resilient with deep supportive roots reaching down deep into the earth. As I feel myself being that tree, I picture these supporting ties growing from the soles of my feet. Their thick weaving forms grow quickly, spreading down into the ground past the hardwood floors and the concrete foundation of the dance studio, into the cool dark earth beneath me.*

*With my attention on these fast growing tendrils, I notice the arches of my feet start to tingle and I stretch out my toes and redistribute my weight. I stand a little taller as if inspired by the sturdy trunk of the tree whose image I hold in my mind and I take another deep breath that moves fully into my lungs. As I breathe in, the sharp uncomfortable bitterness that was clinging to my ribs just moments earlier, releases its restrictive grip and my breathing becomes deeper. The raw emotional edge that followed me into the dance studio begins to melt away as it drains out through my root system, seeping harmlessly into the ground. After only a few breaths, I feel solid and more stable, like the tree I am imagining in my mind. The shaky memory of the thin, transparent guise that I wore into class this morning slips into the background and I no longer think about hiding my swollen eyes. Without these distracting thoughts, I find the richness of my physical awareness is intensified and I begin to notice how cool the hardwood floors feel beneath my feet and how comforting the warm morning sun is on my back. Everything seems still, even the thoughts in my mind.*

*“After you have finished with your visualization, I want everyone to take a seat on the ground and bring your attention back to me,” Vani says.*

*I take one last deep breath before I open my eyes, whispering a word of thanks to the universe for the stability I now feel compared to only moments before. It is as if I have slid out from under a restrictive coat that I have left lying on the ground. I still see it there, rumpled in a discarded pile but I don’t move to pick it up. I move my attention to the class around me and become aware of the relaxed yet attentive mood that has settled over the rest of the room as everyone else sits down and waits for the next set of instructions.*

*“For the next activity, we are going to try to feel qi or life force with our hands. I want everyone to hold your arms up in front of your chest, like this ... and then slowly move them towards each other,” Vani says as she walks around the room, demonstrating the activity for us.*

*“In particular, I want you to pay attention to what you are sensing with your palms. When you are ready, slowly move your hands towards each other and note what you feel,” she explains and then she releases us to try for ourselves.*

*As I lift my hands up in front of me, I’m not sure what to expect and I find myself noticing the creak in my shoulders and the weight of my arms as I slowly move them towards each other. Positive that these physical sensations are distractions, I consciously take a deep breath, close my eyes and lean into the relaxation that comes when I breathe out. As I remember Vani’s instructions and narrow my focus to the palms of my hands, I notice a warmth that sits nestled between my hovering fingers. I stop moving altogether and strain every sense trying to feel more and work out where this heat is coming from. My hands are too far apart for it to be the physical sense of my other hand and it isn’t my breath flowing between my palms. As I rule out the possibilities in my mind, I slowly move my hands closer together in tiny increments, studying the responding sensations. Gradually I become aware of a buoyant and subtle solidness to the space between my palms as the warmth I have been feeling becomes more intense and my skin begins to tingle.*

*This tingly feeling captures all of my attention as I try to examine it with careful scrutiny. It feels like an electric, ‘plugged in’ sensation that travels up my arms and vibrates across my chest when my hands get closer together. I imagine that the tingling sensation is a sign that all of the nerves in my palms are awake and feeling absolutely every sensation that crosses their path. As I keep moving my hands towards each other I swear my fingers are about to touch and my eyes spring open to confirm the impending collision. When I open them however, I’m shocked to see my fingertips are still a centimetre away. I was sure there was only a hairs breadth between them and this visual information confuses me for a moment. As I struggle to reconcile the overwhelming sensation of closeness with the visual feedback that tells me my fingers aren’t as near as I thought, I’m intrigued and I quickly close my eyes again to resume the movement of my hands. As I concentrate on my fingers and the space between them, the tactile information is so intense that when my hands do touch, I feel the ridges of my fingerprints slide over each other. I’ve never paid such careful attention to the skin on my hands before and I’m enthralled by how sensitive they are.*

*As I pull my hands apart, moving slowly so I can focus on the warmth and electricity that I sense pulsing there, I notice this energy is throbbing in time with my heart beat. I hold my*

*breath so no other noise can interfere or distract my attention from analyzing what it is that I am sensing. These sensations are so strong and palpable that I cannot help but be bewildered.*

*“How have I never noticed this feeling before?” I wonder to myself.*

*As I contemplate these vibrations, my concentration is broken by the growing whispers I hear in the room around me as other people finish the activity and begin to talk. I open my eyes and look to my friend Quincey<sup>7</sup> who is sitting a few metres away. I carefully drop my cupped palms into my lap, still exquisitely aware of the sensitivity of my skin.*

*“Did you feel anything?” I ask, no longer able to hide a grin that breaks out across my face.*

*“Yeah, my hands were warm and tingly,” she replies and I nod in agreement.*

*“Me too,” I say as my thoughts return to the powerful impressions that I had not expected.*

*“Does anybody want to share what they experienced?” Vani asks the class and I look up from my introspection to hear what other people have to say.*

*The first comments that are voiced are positive; people tell of feeling warmth and tingling sensations similar to what Quincey and I had felt. Others, however, don’t know if they felt anything at all and voice their doubt. I realize I have no reservations – the feelings that I noticed were loud and consuming. I’m excited and I cannot wait to do more activities.*

*“Sometimes it takes practice to feel life force with your hands and sometimes other people may never feel it. Everyone is different,” Vani explains. “Don’t give up though. I’d encourage you to all practice this exercise again at home on your own,” she says. “For the sake of time, however, we will keep moving on. Our next activity will be done with partners, so if you will find someone to work with, we can start.”*

*I look back to Quincey and we grin and exchange nods, cementing our unspoken contract that we will pair up for the next exercise. We slide closer to each other and then turn to listen to Vani.*

*“In this next activity, you will be trying to feel someone else’s qi or life force. I want you to sit facing your partner and then without talking, move your hands together, just as you did in the first exercise,” Vani explains. “Remember to go slow and concentrate on your palms.”*

*Quincey and I begin straight away and readjust our seated positions so that we are facing each other, both of us trying to get comfortable on the hard studio floor. I keep my eyes open and hold my arm up; slowly moving my hand towards my friend’s outstretched fingers. The movement feels awkward and jerky at first and I find that I am looking at Quincey’s hand trying to judge how fast I should be moving. I try to keep my pace even with her but still slow enough to ensure I don’t miss anything. As our hands get closer together, however, I sense the warmth and tingle that I felt in the first activity on my own but this time it is more intense. I look and estimate that we are at least 10 centimetres away and I focus all of my attention on what I am feeling with*

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym.

*my hand. As we get closer, I notice a sensation that almost feels sticky, like a magnetic charge that catches me and suddenly the effort to hold my arm up disappears. I no longer have to watch Quincey's hand in order to move my own; our palms start moving together in what looks like an orchestrated dance as we mirror each other's actions, moving closer and then further apart. It feels like our arms are on a predetermined track, like train cars that can only move where the rail line takes them. I break my concentration and glance up at Quincey's face to gauge her reaction. She is biting her lip in concentration but at my look, she grins back at me. I break out in a massive smile in response but I don't say anything and return my concentration to my hand.*

*As I observe the movement of our arms, I focus on the magnetic attraction that I feel between our two hands. It gets stronger the closer our palms are together as does the warmth and tingly sensation I had felt before. The electric feeling that goes with it is like little pin pricks across my skin that run up the soft underside of my arm. I don't find them painful; they are more like tiny points of light that are extremely sensitive. There is something else too, something that lies behind all of the physical sensations. There is an awareness that the subtle energy that I feel in my hand comes from someone else. It is so slight that my cognitive mind cannot locate what it is that makes me think that but somehow I know that Quincey's energy feels different from my own.*

*As I struggle to comprehend this delicate awareness, Vani signals the end of the activity. I look up at Quincey and feel a little mystified that it was possible to feel her energy as easily as that.*

*"Did you feel that?" I ask as I take in the wide grin across Quincey's face.*

*"Yeah, that was awesome," she says and I get caught up in her infectious delight.*

*"It was so weird," I say, "almost sticky: like our hands were attached."*

*Quincey nods and she begins to describe what she felt but is interrupted as Vani asks the class for feedback on this last activity.*

*"How did that go, trying to feel someone else's life force?" she asks as she looks around the room, waiting for people to share their experiences.*

*"We definitely felt ... something," Quincey offers as she pauses, searching for the right word. "It was warm and sticky," she says, looking back to me as she borrows the word I had used.*

*I speak up and add my own reflections.*

*"It was kind of magnetic ... and I thought that it was stronger than when I did the first activity on my own," I say and I see other people in the class nod in agreement.*

*As other pairs offer their feedback, I notice that more people have had success with this second activity than with the first. There is less doubt voiced and the animation and noise in the room gradually increases as people begin to talk amongst themselves. I find myself thinking about the possibility of repeating this at home and I wonder whether the collective energy of working in a group like this is helping with the success. Vani lets the class chat a little longer as*

*she talks to the people sitting near her and then she straightens up, clearing her voice so she can be heard over the rising din.*

*“For the next exercise, I am still going to have you work in pairs, but one of you will be closing your eyes,” Vani says as she pulls the class back on track.*

*“The first person will hold their hand up somewhere in the space between you both while the other person, who has their eyes closed, will try to locate it by searching for your energy. There is to be no communication or direction from either person during this exercise. The key will be serious concentration. When you think you have located your partner’s energy, you can open your eyes and see how close you have come to their actual hand,” Vani explains.*

*A low buzz of background chatter breaks out in the room again as pairs discuss who will go first. As I turn to Quincey she is already asking if I want to start.*

*“Sure,” I reply as I readjust myself so that I am facing her. Once I am comfortable, I close my eyes and become aware of the noise around me as the class gradually quietens down. I feel the chill of the polished floors under my legs and notice how hard the wood feels on my ankles. I also sense the other pairs of students that are close by and Vani walking slowly around the room observing us all.*

*Quincey tells me she is ready and I bring my attention back to the task at hand. Instantly the background information falls away and I no longer notice the ambient noise or my friends who are sitting in the vicinity. I bring my arm up in front of me and I focus on moving my hand as slowly as I can, feeling the creak in my shoulder as I hold my fingers extended up in front of me. I notice my thoughts as I worry that I am moving too quickly and that I will miss Quincey’s hand or that I have my arm outstretched too far and I might accidentally bump into her. But as I fine tune my focus back to the sensations in my palm, those niggling concerns in the back of my mind drop away and everything else disappears.*

*As I become aware of my hand, I notice the taut feeling of my skin and the natural bend in my fingers as each joint relaxes, outstretched but not rigid. I am also intensely aware of the flesh on my palm and I feel the warmth of my skin and the faint beat of my pulse. I keep moving my arm as slowly as I can and I concentrate on looking for any change in sensation that I might feel. After a few careful sweeps of the area in front of me, I notice a subtle impression at the very edge of my skin, a slight electric feeling that I recognize from the other activities. The silence of my inner thoughts makes my ears ring as I strain and concentrate on every nuance and feeling that my senses are picking up. Without my sight to confirm that this tingle is coming from Quincey, I scrutinize the sensations in the space around it, trying to differentiate between here and there. I move my hand to the left and right, asking myself if there is a difference between both spots. I am sure that there is, it is subtle but it is there just like before; a stickiness or a density, like a magnet, and I notice how difficult it is to pull my hand away from that position. When I concentrate on my palm I find that there is a sense that this particular space is somehow more solid and alive than the area around it. As I focus on my palm I take a leap that this palatable difference is what I am looking for.*

*“There” I announce, settling on this location as the space where I will declare Quincey’s hand to be. As I open my eyes, all seriousness drops away as I let go of the extreme*

*concentration I have been holding. As I release the tension that has gathered in my shoulders, I take a deep inhalation and realize that unconsciously I'd been practically holding my breath for the last few moments. As soon as I have my vision back again, I take in Quincey's astonished face and notice her mouth open in mild surprise.*

*My hand has stopped right in front of hers.*

*"How did you do that?" she asks, the question hanging in the air between us as I join her in mild astonishment.*

*"I don't know," I reply. "I just felt it."*

*I am slightly taken aback at my success in this activity and I find myself blinking in astonishment for a moment or two. As I think about the sensations that I had just been feeling in my skin, I ask myself whether I had really felt anything or was I just imagining them? But there was her hand, right before me.*

*"I did feel something," I tell myself as I shake off the doubt. It was as if the previous activity had shown me what to look for and now a part of me knew what frequency or wavelength to tune into.*

*Still a little dumbstruck, I glance around and notice my friends Noel<sup>8</sup> and Kylie<sup>9</sup> who are sitting nearby and I see from their expressions and despondent postures that they had difficulty with this activity.*

*"I couldn't feel anything," Kylie said, her demeanor implying that she has given up the search for Noel's hand.*

*"You need to move slowly and really concentrate," I offer, realizing that I'm not really sure how to describe what I had felt.*

*"Maybe it's because I have a cold," Kylie suggests, and we all nod, assuming that her illness would definitely mute her senses.*

*As our two groups confer, Vani sees us talking and walks over to ask how it went. Quincey and I nod enthusiastically, Quincey answering for us that it was a success and that I had been able to locate her hand.*

*"Great, what did it feel like?" she asks me and I fumble for the right words to answer her question.*

*"I'm not sure, that space just felt... different," I say, my cheeks flushing red with a confusing mix of embarrassment and pride.*

*I realize I can't articulate what it was that I was feeling or how I knew it was Quincey's hand. In thinking about what I had just done, the only clue I can give is that it was a discerning awareness that came from concentrating as hard as I could.*

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<sup>8</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>9</sup> A pseudonym.



*Vani smiles as if she understands my lack of words and then looks to the other pair.*

*“How about you two. How did it go?” she asks them.*

*Kylie tells Vani that she couldn't feel anything and offers up her reasoning that her cold was interfering. Vani agrees that was probably the case and encourages both groups to swap roles and to try the activity for a second time.*

*Quincey and I move back to our original positions away from the other two and refocus our attention, getting comfortable so that we can begin again. As Quincey closes her eyes, I hold my hand up in the space between us, and I tell her that I am ready.*

*As Quincey starts the search for my hand, I think about Kylie's inability to feel anything and I wonder if Quincey will be able to find me. I watch her arm move slowly in front of her, back and forth in a scanning pattern, searching the air for a feeling that might give away my location. Although not in the active role in this activity, I realize that I might be able to help Quincey locate my hand by making my energy as big as possible. I don't really know what that means, but I think about my palm and the electric tingle that I have been feeling all morning. I notice how warm my hand is when I concentrate on my skin and how I can feel my heart beat as a subtle throb in the fleshy part at the base of my thumb. I think about this warmth and I imagine it getting hotter, expanding out from my fingers in a wave that matches my pulse. I push it away from my physical self as if I was turning up the temperature and I try to touch Quincey's hand with it when she passes by. With all of my thoughts on making my energy bigger and warmer, I begin to notice a slight layer of dampness on my skin, evidence of my exertion and the heat that is ramping up.*

*As Quincey moves her hand past my own outstretched fingers again, she slowly stops just as I had, moving back and forth, testing the air for a discernible difference. I concentrate even harder and try to energetically catch her hand with mine, connecting, and pulling her awareness to the centre of my palm. She moves on, testing other areas, feeling and comparing sensations but she comes back to the area where I have my arm positioned. She stops, making slight adjustments and comparisons and then decides on this location.*

*“There,” she says as she opens her eyes, taking in the view before her, gasping when she sees my hand in front of hers and then grabbing it in surprise.*

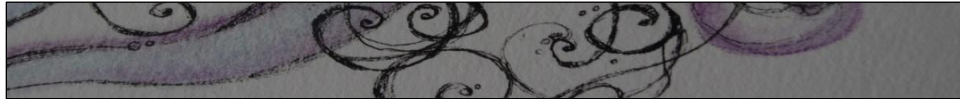
*“Oh my God,” she whispers in total shock, her free hand moving to cover her mouth. “I can't believe I found it,” she says as a giddy mood fills the air between us and we laugh at our astonishment.*

*We both sit there for a moment in silence, stunned and bewildered that we had been able to feel each other's energy, but grinning at the excitement of it all. Then we break into laughter at the sheer joy of the experience. As the class moves on, a part of me steals away for a quiet introspective look at all that had just happened. I notice a subtle new self-awareness that centres around my ability to feel this lifeforce. There is something in the connection to this energy that feels familiar and comforting; like an old glove that naturally fits all of the bends and bumps of my hand. Being connected to it is like opening a doorway into a world that I have been searching for, one filled with subtle and almost magical impressions. And yet it has been sitting here all along, just beyond my fingertips, I just never paid attention.*



In looking back on my feelings from that morning, I remember being awash with a bewildering mix of quiet self-satisfaction and astonishment. I spent the next few days walking around with a distracted and reflective countenance as I tried to take in all that had occurred in that class. In that one instant when I had felt energy with my hand, I realized that I was different from most of my peers. Although others had felt it too, I could tell that my ability to sense this life force and direct it was a little more attuned than most. For me it seemed louder and somehow natural, as if it had been waiting there all this time for me to pay attention.

When I think about these memories and look for evidence of personal reservations or a need to keep these experiences a secret, there is no trace of this self-silencing at all. Most of my close friends at university were in the class with me and they had also felt the energy move themselves. When we talked about what we had experienced, we were all a little mystified and excited by what it all meant. When I talked to my sister on the phone about what I had learnt, she was as inspired and as interested as me. I wonder if this small community of accepting and encouraging listeners insulated me from a potential doubting or dubious audience. Perhaps the impact of this direct personal experience loomed so large there was no room for self-doubt.



## **Energy and Healing**

Just as clearly as I remember feeling another person's energy for the first time, I remember the moment when I first witnessed its healing potential. I had come home from university one weekend not long after the class where I had first felt energy. I was home to visit my friends and family and to reconnect with the life I lived before I moved away for school. My campus was a two hour drive from my family home, so I would often stay at my Mum and Dad's for the whole weekend, visiting friends, lying in front of the heater to soak up the familiar and comforting, and of course, raiding the pantry with the help of my Mum. My younger sister, Angelique, still lived with my parents, a nestling who as it turned out, would never actually get the chance to leap from the threshold of the home front. My sister had a chronic health condition: Crohn's disease, an illness whose weight continually threatened to crush her outgoing voracity and tenacious spirit, yoking her to the burden of persistent and unrelenting pain. She had developed this disease in her later high school years and I watched as it slowly ate away her social existence and physical strength. The one thing it could never touch, however, was the beautiful and inspiring soul that shone through her bright blue eyes and poured out in her creative writing. My sister was a gifted wordsmith who wrote with a passion and unencumbered spirit whenever she set pen to page. There was never a trace of pain or anguish in her writing; it was as if through her words, her true self was set free.

We were always close, sharing a room our whole lives until I left and moved away for school. In looking back, I know without a doubt, that it was the warmth and comfort of her presence that refuelled me in those early days when I felt so far away from all I knew. I came home often, and we would always talk, sharing stories about everything that we were learning. My sister was studying professional writing and would enthrall me with tales of James Joyce and the hidden etymology of words. I would share stories from school and what I was discovering about meditation and Buddhist philosophy. I always felt like a wide eyed neophyte who had stumbled upon a secret garden when I tried to explain the wonder of it all to her. My favourite part of those weekend visits was the Sunday mornings when we would read the paper together, pulling out the arts and culture section first, staying in our pajamas and dressing gowns, drinking tea late into the morning. It was on one of those weekend visits home when I found myself sneaking into the house late on a Saturday evening.

*It is past midnight and I have just arrived back at my Mum and Dad's house after being out visiting friends. I know my parents are asleep because all of the lights in the house are off so I move gingerly trying not to wake anyone up. As I tip toe down the hallway towards the bedrooms, I see a strip of light shining out from under Angelique's door and seeing as I'm not ready for sleep, I knock softly to see if she feels like visiting for a while. As I swing the door open, I see her lying crumpled on the floor in the fetal position, clutching her stomach in pain and I fall to my knees beside her, not even sure how I got there so fast.*

*Anguish and exhaustion are etched on her pale, freckled face as she grimaces with the effort of rolling over to look up at me. My sister and I are so close I read her expression as clearly as if I was looking in a mirror. Her eyes tell me of her tired resolve to ride out the pain and her desperate pleading wish that it would end soon. Seeing her on the floor like this tells me straight away that this attack is worse than normal and I feel utterly useless as I sit by her side.*

*I reach my hand out and rest it gently on her arm, trying to offer some comfort and support with my physical touch.*

*"Is there anything I can do?" I ask, knowing full well there is little anybody can do.*

*Angelique's voice is quiet and strained when she whispers her reply.*

*"No," she says as she looks back into my eyes, and I see that she is thankful she isn't alone.*

*With my hand resting on her arm, I feel the love I have for my little sister overflow as I desperately wish there was something more that I could offer. And then without conscious thought, I ask her to lie on her back.*

*I had been telling Angelique about the activity I had done in class where I had felt energy with my hand and I was suddenly convinced that I could do it again, here with her. As she obliges my request and silently rolls onto her back, I place my hand over her abdomen, hovering it over her still body about a hands breadth away. As I close my eyes and send my attention to my palm, I withdraw my consciousness from our childhood bedroom and I begin searching for the pain that is assailing my sister. I move my palm over her stomach, searching back and forth, just as I had in class, noting that my mind is absolutely still. It is like I am listening with my fingers, waiting for the sensations to grab my attention and lead me to what I seek. It doesn't*

*take long for me to find it: a dense block of thick, immovable energy that feels dark and stagnant. When I locate it, I note that my hand won't move on – it is stuck just like the magnetic pull I had felt in school. This spiteful wall is impossible to ignore and I open my eyes and look straight into Angelique's face, her quiet voice speaking with complete and utter faith.*

*"I knew you would be able to feel it," she says "that's exactly where it hurts."*

*Angelique's words not only confirm what my hand already knows, her conviction encourages me to try working with the pain in an attempt to relieve her from this burden. I close my eyes again with the intention to push this insidious mass of dense energy away from my sister. Although I have no training in energy healing modalities (it will be a decade before I have any official instruction) my desire to intervene on my sister's behalf is so strong, it leaves no room for doubt over technique. The thought that I don't know what I am doing never enters my mind.*

*With my eyes closed again, the view of our bunk beds and the well worn carpet from our old bedroom floats away and I tune into the sensations I feel with my hand. The intense thickness in the air that identifies my sister's crippling pain catches my hand and once again I cannot ignore the obvious presence below my fingers. With no formal steps or procedures to follow, I turn to my imagination and I cup my fingers around the thick and somehow solid energy. It feels like an anchor that has dug into the sand, firmly entrenched in my sister's abdomen, un-moving and uncaring about the wreckage that it is causing.*

*As I fold my fingers around this ball, I push my hand away from Angelique's side, urging the energy to move away and follow my lead, leaving my sister to be in peace. It is my intention and imagination that communicate my desire, as my arm moves slowly away from my sister's side. When my arm is straight and well away from Angelique, I shake my hands off as if I'm flinging dank and murky slime away from my fingers and then I move my hand back into its original position and repeat this pushing movement again.*

*I do this three times in all and then my concern for Angelique's welfare breaks my concentration and I ask her how she feels?*

*"Better," she says. "It doesn't hurt as much. Thank you," she whispers as she takes my hand and sits up, her breathing getting deeper as she finally lets go of the internal tension that was helping her hold the pain at bay.*

*"You should get some rest," I say as gently as possible, as I help her to stand and move over to her bed.*

*As I look into her eyes and smile my goodnight, I'm relieved that she is feeling better and I quietly leave and turn out the light. As I go back to the room where I'm staying for the weekend, I think about what had just happened and I can't help but be amazed that I had been able to help. As I experience a tinge of awe regarding the whole experience, I also feel a strong assuredness that is exciting and encouraging. Somehow I just knew that it would work, and it had.*



As I returned back to school after that weekend and the semester moved along, my attention shifted to final assignments and exams. I was still intrigued by what had transpired in that one class however, and the way I had been able to help Angelique. Inspired by these mysterious experiences, I decided to write my final research paper in my Mind Body Exercise class on traditional Chinese medicine. I wanted to learn more about energy (what the Chinese call qi) and how it is used in healing. I was so enamored by what I learnt in that paper that I decided there and then that I wanted to study acupuncture. These plans, however, were put on hold as I enrolled in a student exchange program with the University of Victoria in Canada. Although I was intrigued by learning more about this healing energy, I knew that my study plans could wait. After three years working hard in school, I wasn't ready to jump straight into another degree program. The lure to travel was stronger.

As part of the exchange program, I lived and worked on the beautiful west coast of British Columbia for six months, after which I found myself well and truly smitten by the travel bug. I spent the next five years living in Canada and the UK, backpacking and exploring foreign cities. While I moved around I read books on wholistic health and alternate medicine and found myself drawn to people who viewed the world through this different lens. My independent learning didn't alter my desire to formally study acupuncture, however. This dream just waited patiently for me to find the right time to finish travelling and to go back home. Eventually, I did just that and I returned to Melbourne three years later, enrolling in a Bachelor of Science degree in traditional Chinese medicine in a college that taught a range of wholistic healing modalities and other complementary and alternate health practices.



### **What is energy?**

Now that I had returned to school and had begun formally studying traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture, I found myself devouring everything that I was taught. The Eastern philosophies and paradigms that were the foundation of these healing practices felt familiar and resonated with the spiritual contemplation that I had been doing over the last decade. Because I had kept those study plans in the back of my head for so long it felt like I had finally come home – literally and metaphysically. I never considered the assignments or workload to be a burden and I studied hard, devoting myself to my school work and feeling truly fortunate that I loved what I was doing so much. I found myself swimming in a world where all of my questions were answered while thousands more were springing up in their place. I learnt that modern western cultures are the only people of the world that do not have a specific term for the phenomenon of energy. Hence, individual healers often use the term they feel most drawn to or one that resonates with their particular training. As I immersed myself in the teachings of traditional

Chinese medicine I took up the word qi. Years later when I studied other energy healing modalities, I released this term and began using the same word that my teacher used: energy.

During my early lessons in my acupuncture studies, I read the assigned textbook *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (Maciocia, 1989). It explained that the fluid and ethereal nature of qi makes it difficult to translate into a succinct English definition. When I read *The Web that has no Weaver* (Kaptchuk, 2000), a book written by one of the first westerners to learn traditional Chinese medicine in China, the author explained that Chinese metaphysics allows for a symbolic interpretation of the term that is not possible within a western Cartesian dichotomy. Because of this, the nature of qi is best captured by “comparison, allusion and suggestion” (Kaptchuk, 2000, p. 37-38). This is when I fell in love with the poetic translation of this term. For me, it is as if the true nature of the phenomenon ensures that it will continually slip through all attempts to capture it and tie it down.

When I begin my master’s research over a decade after this lesson, I am still inspired by the elusive nature of energy and how impossible it is to define. When I try to write my own description of this phenomenon for my thesis, I find I still speak in these suggestions and veiled references.



Journal entry: 12 January 2013

When I sense energy, I often feel it through my palms as an electric tingle that sets my skin on fire. And although there is warmth, it isn't heat that I am referring to. This fire is an attentive awareness that reaches beyond my physical limitations and senses what it means to be alive, gathered and vibrating there in my palm. For me, energy healing is intimate and personal and yet it instantly joins me to all of humanity, smiling with the obvious contradiction. When I sense this universal connection, there is no separation between you or me and no distinction between my hand or the dust from the galaxies around us. This energy coupled with a healing thought carries the potential of unborn stars and its release becomes a subtle push whose movement ripples outwards like a breeze across the surface of a pond. This is what energy means to me.





Figure 2: Michelle Flowers. 2014. *Energy*. [ink and watercolour pencil on paper].



## Describing Energy

In offering up this description of how I perceive energy, I feel that I must immediately reiterate the important point that energy healing is different for everybody. I do this lest my words be misinterpreted as a concrete account that can be referred to and held up as a definition of the ethereal. In my experiences of energy healing, I have found that each healer senses life force differently and we often create our own language to go with our individual perceptions. Sometimes these perceptions are influenced by the lexicon that came with our training and sometimes our individual sensitivities affect how we describe energy. Some people see energy and others hear things, while many practitioners feel energy in a tactile or sensory way like myself.

The following quotes from academic research and journal articles demonstrate the diversity of descriptive terms that energy healers have used when trying to portray energy. While there has been a limited amount of academic research done from the healer's perspective, the following quotes taken from interviews with various healers, highlight the differences in their representations.

"There is an uplifting energy, where I come away feeling really good. And there's a kind of joyous feeling" (Moore, Ting & Rossiter-Thornton, 2008, p.165).

"The group atmosphere [when doing energy healing together with numerous healers] was described as: resonating, harmonious, peaceful, joyous, pure, churchlike and rejuvenating" (Moore et al., 2008, p. 166).

"Some [healers] describe the energy field or aura that surrounds a person [that] has layers that become less dense as you move away from the person. Some are able to see the layers as different colors" (Warber, Cornelio, Straughn, & Kile, 2004, p. 1109).

"I'm really working with an electrical charge. And it's this charge, then, that emanates from me, from my heart, from my hands" (Warber et al., 2004 p. 1109).

"So the energies literally begin to shake and vibrate and then they open up with radiant healing" (Warber et al., 2004, p. 1109).

"And once I do that, then I begin to feel or sense – palpate – the different motions that are going on in the body, with my hands....and I am feeling electrical currents, ... and I am actually trying to jump start the battery" (Markides, 1996, p. 129).

"And when you're trained and can feel the blockage with your hands, you can feel where the energy is not flowing" (Markides, 1996, p 138).

"When you put your hands on or near the person's body, you can feel the flow of energy. And you can feel what's called an energy cyst, where the energy is almost like a hard round circle" (Markides, 1996, p. 142).

"I get hot hands, my hands heat up, or I feel this holding around me. And I can feel coolness and heat." (Warber et al., 2004, p. 1109).

"Sometimes [my hands will] feel a pressure, or almost like a knowingness, like a sixth sense or something in my hand..." (Warber et al., 2004, p. 1109).

"For others, it is a feeling of 'heat', 'tingling,' or 'holding'. Yet another description of the divine energy pouring through the therapist was more kinesthetic: 'It's like riding on a river.' (Warber et al., 2004, p. 1110).

"Sometimes it feels like electricity running through you. Other times it might feel like... what love feels like" (Warber et al., 2004, p. 1110).

"Different illnesses elicit different sensations in her hands as she passes them over the healee. These include 'prickling, warmth or other sensations not easy to define'" (Benor, 2001, p. 44).



When I read these quotes I find the most resonance with the ones that describe physical sensations such as electricity and heat. These impressions match the physical experiences I have when I do energy healing work. I also recognize the sentiments that talk about feeling the blocked cysts of energy and I remember the dense feeling that hovered over my sister's abdomen all of those years ago.

I also recognize the pauses in the quotes, the gaps between words and the searching for adjectives that adequately describe energy healing. The comments that are awkward and strain against the limitations of language are familiar in the effort that the healers are using. The phenomenon of energy healing feels so otherworldly that capturing a description with something as feeble and deficient as marks upon a page is very difficult to do.

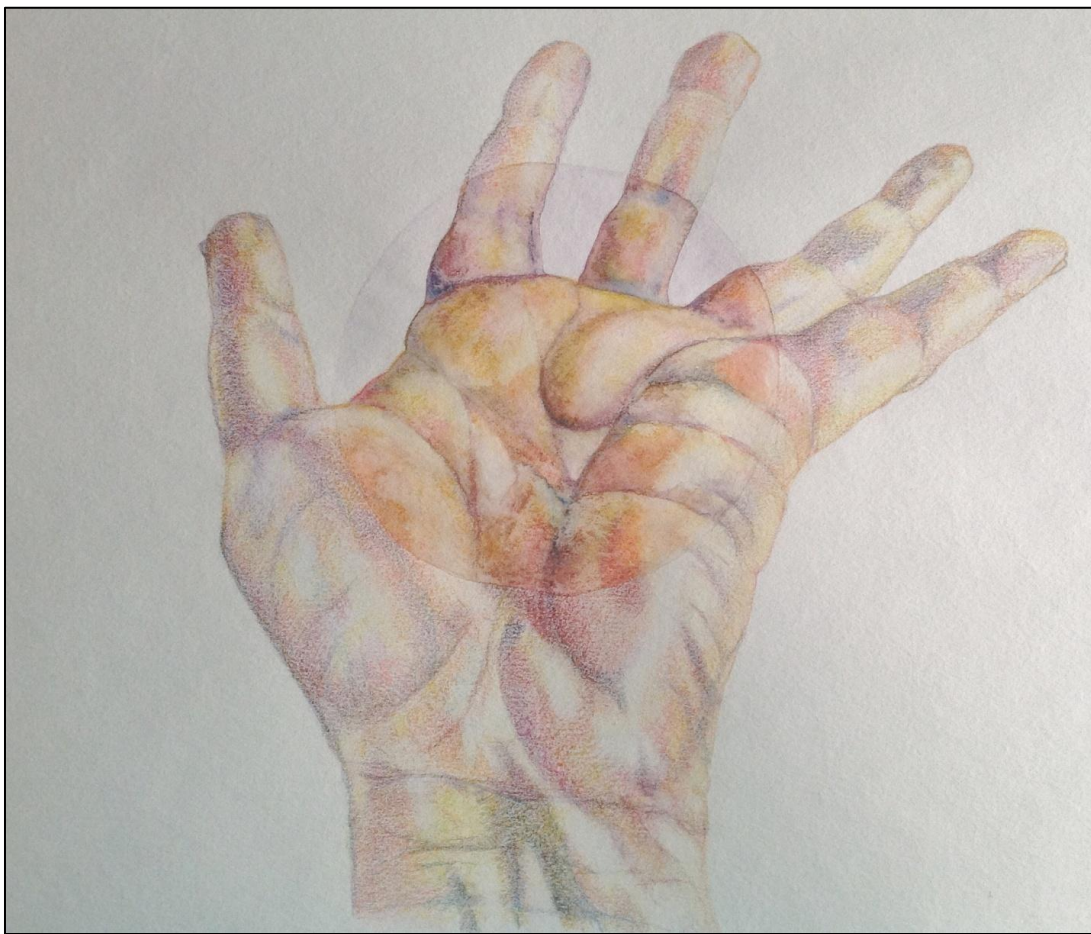


Figure 3: Michelle Flowers. 2013. *Feeling energy*. [Watercolour pencil on paper].



## Chapter Two: Silencing and Credibility

### Silencing

With my return to school and my submersion into traditional Chinese medicine and alternate healing paradigms, I not only satisfied my craving for knowledge about energy and wholistic health, but I also discovered the first stirrings of my shadow story. It was during my time studying acupuncture that I first felt I needed to hide my burgeoning ontological perspective. While my school days were filled with like-minded people who were invested in complementary and alternate medicine, my old life began to drift further and further away from my new ontology. When I spent time with friends I had known for years I found myself in situations where my eager and excitable self was sharing stories about what I was learning at school. What I realized all too quickly was that not everyone had the same perspective as me.

*It is a Friday evening, and I am out with a group of my old friends, celebrating a birthday at a local popular restaurant. We are sitting at a couple of tables clustered in a dark back corner, oblivious to the noise and the general goings on around us. We are too caught up in our own reunion to notice the rest of the room as we talk and laugh and order a round of drinks. As the waitress brings the meals, we connect with friends we haven't seen in months; for some of us it has been years. Over this time our group members have changed jobs, travelled overseas, gone back to school and moved away, and outings like these are filled with laughter and joviality as we catch up and fall back into old routines.*

*It is later in the evening and we are all in high spirits as we celebrate and recall the adventures of our younger years. Smaller conversations start up between us when we get tired of shouting across the table. At one point I begin to talk to my friend Claire<sup>10</sup> who is sitting next to me, and I tell her stories of what I am learning in my acupuncture degree. My enthusiasm and the wine have me talking in an animated voice describing how the lungs and large intestine are related in Chinese medicine. As I tell her about the five elements that govern the meridians the other conversations around our end of the table fall quiet and some of my friends begin listening to what I am saying.*

*As I pause in my explanation, totally enthralled by the details I am recalling from my recent lessons in school, my friend Peter<sup>11</sup> asks a question.*

*The restaurant is so loud however, that I can't hear what he is saying.*

*"What did you say?" I ask, and I lean forward across the table, turning my head so that I can hear his reply. As I look at my friends that are sitting near him, I notice they are turning their faces away, shaking their heads in response to whatever he said.*

*As Peter repeats his question, this time I hear his voice but I'm still not sure what he said. I have a feeling I should let it drop by the expressions on my friends faces but for some reason, I ask one more time, "Sorry, what did you say?"*

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<sup>10</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>11</sup> A pseudonym.

*“Who CARES?” he yells across the table and instantly I am silenced, regretting that I had asked him to repeat his question so many times. As I am overcome with embarrassment, I sit stunned for a moment while wreathing thoughts and emotions swirl together in my head. I feel like an idiot and a fool, rambling on about something that I suddenly think no one else cares about at all.*

*In response Peter’s girlfriend punches him in the arm in mock infuriation and scolds him in an incredulous voice.*

*“Pete,” she rebukes and the mood around the table lifts as my friends laugh at his reprimand. The tension that had momentarily silenced the table is released and I sense my friends chalking Peter’s insult up to his inebriation and drunken bravado. But there is something else that I still feel hanging awkwardly in the air between us all.*

*As I get up and excuse myself to go to the bathroom, I think about the ostracising feeling that is gradually overwhelming me. I think about the awkward silence and how ridiculed I feel and then I begin to recall other comments that some of my friends have made in the past few months. I remember them asking for proof of the existence of acupuncture meridians and teasing me with declarations about the perceived absurdity of a needle in your hand being used to treat a headache.*

*As I remember these comments and I sit with the painful feelings of hurt and degradation, I convince myself that my friends think I am a fool. Whether this is true or not, I have no idea. All I know is at this moment I feel like a child that has been caught believing in fairy tales long after her peers have grown up.*

*As I hide in the bathroom I feel shocked at my own naivety. I have been so engaged by the things I am learning at school and the conversations that I have when I am there that it never occurred to me that my old group of friends might think that it was all make-believe. In my distressed state, I don’t stop to think about this logically. All I know is that I feel hurt and alone and chastised for talking about something that I love and that something is strange and different and difficult, if not impossible, for my old friends to accept. These polarizing experiences impress upon me a stark caution: when I talk about complementary and alternate medicine I am vulnerable and open to mockery. To ensure I don’t feel this way again I tell myself that I need to keep quiet and guard what I say, keeping this part of myself hidden. Until I have gauged my audience to see what side of the fence they sit on, I need to be careful so I don’t reveal my perspective. This caution to keep my alternate health paradigm a secret effectively splits my world in two. Tonight I learn that it is safer to be quiet.*



Despite the doubt and silencing comments that I experienced from some of my friends that evening, I continued my acupuncture studies and developed my confidence and conviction for my alternate healing paradigm. I still guarded my perspective when I was around strangers however, and I learned to avoid awkward conversations about alternate health with friends who

held different beliefs to my own. Gradually I met new friends through my acupuncture course and I found safe spaces to talk freely about my alternate healing world. What quickly developed in response to these opposing environments that I was encountering daily, however, was a personal chasm between my two identities. As I settled into this protective routine, I quickly learnt to walk with one foot in two worlds. When I felt safe, I talked freely; when I walked in mainstream society, I kept quiet and censored everything that I said.

It was amongst these difficult emotions, in a time when I continually juggled my opposing realities, that I found out I was pregnant. Due to conditions beyond our control, my husband and I decided to immigrate back to his home in Canada, leaving Australia, my family and my acupuncture studies behind. In my new home province of Saskatchewan, there were no schools where I could continue studying traditional Chinese medicine and so amongst the loneliness of raising small children without family close by and no alternate healing community to turn to for advice, I found myself searching for people who held similar viewpoints as me. Eventually I found mothers' groups that embraced wholistic parenting ideals, yet even then, the individual perspectives on health that I encountered varied drastically. I did, however, find friends that viewed health through a similar lens to me and gradually I found spaces where I could let down my protective shield and talk freely once again.

It was through these new friends and the small alternate healing community that I was building around me that I was introduced to Joyce<sup>12</sup>; a massage therapist and energy healer who taught workshops in Quantum Touch<sup>13</sup> (a form of hands on energy healing). I began working in her alternate health clinic a year after my second child was born and when she offered her next energy healing training workshop, I jumped at the opportunity and seized onto it like a lifeline. After living in Canada for nearly three years, I finally felt like there was a reason for me to be there beyond my husband and small children. I had finally found what I had been searching for since I had first felt energy move with my hands all of those years before. As I continued to work with Joyce, she quickly became a close friend and mentor who answered all of my questions about healing energy and more. As I reconnected with my awareness of qi, which I now called energy, and practiced the healing techniques I was taught, I slowly regained a confidence in my identity as a healer, something that had ebbed away in the years since I had left acupuncture school.



## Credibility

*It is Saturday night and I am talking on the phone with my sister Angelique. After initial updates on my children and life back in Australia, our conversation moves to the energy healing training course that I have just completed.*

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<sup>12</sup> My teacher Joyce has elected to use her own name in this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> Quantum Touch is an energetic healing modality that works with lifeforce to promote physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. This therapy works to focus, amplify and direct this healing energy for optimal health (Quantum-Touch, 2013).

*"I loved the Quantum Touch course so much. It was amazing. I could feel the energy with my hands again...remember? Like that class I took at university all of those years ago. And the energy was so strong because I was in a room full of other healers doing it at the same time. It felt so natural too, like a part of me already knew how to do all of it" I say as my sentences pile into one another.*

*"Yeah, I remember that class. That sounds so cool," Angelique replies.*

*"It was. I have been looking for something like this for so long. I learnt how to feel other people's energy and then how to move it and send it to areas that were hurting. It is so much more personal and intense than using acupuncture needles. When I did my acupuncture course back in Australia, it felt so clinical and ... well, almost removed. You had to think about where you were putting the needles and why. With the energy work, it is based on feeling and sensations. It is so immediate. I love it," I exclaim.*

*"I wish that I was there so you could practice on me," Angelique replies.*

*"I know. Me too," I answer and my excited mood dips for a moment as I am washed over with homesickness and how much I miss my sister.*

*"It is so weird though. Even though I can feel the energy so easily with my hands and I know that it is real, I still have these confusing feelings. I know that most people don't believe in energy healing ... it sounds so hokey. When I am doing it, it just looks like I am putting my hand on someone else. It is nearly more socially acceptable for me to study acupuncture. At least there has been research done on how effective that is. People can sometimes get their head around Chinese medicine because it is so widespread now and it has been used for thousands of years. But energy healing... I am sure people aren't going to get it. I'm afraid they will laugh at me," I say.*

*"They're not going to laugh at you," Angelique reassures me.*

*"Are you sure? Remember that night at the restaurant for Cliff's<sup>14</sup> birthday when Peter asked me 'who cares'?" I reply.*

*"Yeah, but he was just being a jerk. You can't worry about what other people might think. If you can feel the energy and it is helping someone, then that is all that matters," Angelique reassures me. "People don't get it because they haven't felt it or experienced it. Remember that night that you helped me? You have this gift that not everybody has. You have to trust that."*

*"You're right. I guess I just need to get some confidence," I say, somewhat reassured by Angelique's supportive words. "What would I do without you?"*



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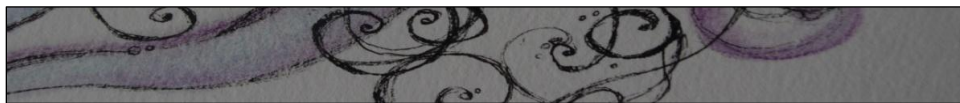
<sup>14</sup> A pseudonym.



After taking the Quantum Touch training course, I continued practicing this energy healing modality on my friends that were interested in alternate health. Being a novice, I was required to accumulate a certain number of hours in order to be accredited. As I practiced and developed my proficiency, however, I continued to find myself torn between my two opposing perspectives. When I was doing my healing work and could feel the movement of energy beneath my hands, I had no doubts about its existence. The strength of the sensations that moved across my palm pulled me into another world; one that felt so magical it swallowed me whole. When I found myself inhabiting mainstream society, however, I found myself struggling with the weight of the social credibility of this alternate healing modality. The constant years of navigating the chasm between my two worlds had left me unable to reconcile the divide. Without a steady client base to encourage me and reassure me that there was a market for this kind of healing work, I found myself caught in the trepidation and self-doubt that what I was doing would never be socially accepted. I was afraid that nobody would come to see me for treatments and that society wouldn't pay for this kind of healing work. After years of being silent and listening to the opinions of those who did not embrace my alternate healing ontology, I could not shake off the impact of their scepticism.

In the meantime, amidst all of my fear and self-doubt, I found out I was pregnant with my third child. It was during this time that I decided that I needed to go back to school. Without the option of finishing my acupuncture degree, I looked for something else that might help me build a career: something that was related to alternate medicine. As I searched the different graduate programs being offered at the university, I realized that I wanted something that was legitimate and credible, something that would reinforce the doubt that hung heavily over my alternate healing identity. This led me to the College of Medicine with hopes that a piece of paper from this respected bastion would convince society of the validity of my healing paradigm. Subconsciously I also hoped it would validate the healing identity that I was personally struggling to inhabit.

In the summer before my graduate school classes began, as I bonded with my new baby and excitedly looked forward to my return to academia, I received a phone call from home bearing news that I had not expected or dreamt of.



## **Doubt**

*It is Saturday night and I am on the phone back home to Australia, talking with my sister Angelique. Our conversations are usually a couple of hours long as we talk about our daily adventures and the details of our lives. When we catch up, we share everything, rambling on for hours as I hold onto the little piece of home that comes through the phone line. Tonight, as we talk, bouncing quickly from subject to subject, she casually mentions a lump she has found on her neck: a pesky annoyance in a long string of health issues that have plagued her recently. As soon as she mentions it I have an errant thought that considers what a lump like this might mean but it remains a tiny spark of a notion that has no time to take hold. Some fearful part of me shuts*

*it down out of shock and absolute denial, steadfastly refusing to give it the worry and concern it deserves.*

*We go on talking until life with three small children calls me away and I don't think about this conversation again until another phone call a few weeks later. This second call is the polar opposite to the first. There is no casual banter or prolonged reconnecting. When I pick up the phone I instantly hear Angelique's reserved and quiet voice. In a serious tone that confuses me for a moment, I listen as she asks me to promise not to interrupt. I have no idea what she is about to say and even in my wildest imaginings, I would never have guessed the news that was about to blindside me. After I have agreed to listen, Angelique begins to read me a letter.*

*"Don't interrupt, don't ask me any questions. Just let me get through this, ok?" she says as I nod in silence, my knees giving out beneath me as I slide into the closest chair.*

*It is stage four terminal bowel cancer that has metastasized to at least a half dozen other tumour sites.*

*My sister is just 30 years old.*

*The next week finds me lost for words, silenced in the cruelest way as I struggle to find something to say that will support my little sister. My emails are short as I search for anything that will inspire hope, something that I am forcing myself to fabricate. Inside I am confused that something so unthinkable could be happening. My mind is empty; all I can grasp is that this cannot be true.*

*Somehow amidst the fog that my balking mind has slipped into, I organize to fly back home to Australia with my five month old baby, leaving my husband and two older children back in Canada. I can stay for six weeks, a mere smidgeon of time that will have to do as Angelique and I create our last physical memories together, trying to make up for the years we have been apart and the years we will never have. As I watch her battle excruciating pain and see her waste away in front of me I use my training as an energy healer to give her treatments when I can. As I lay my hands on her shoulders I wish with all my heart that I can do something, anything to make her feel better like that quiet night all of those years ago. When I am done, she smiles weakly and says thank you but she looks as tired and wrung out as she was before I began. I feel useless and ineffectual as I look into her eyes and I fall right back into the pattern of self-doubt that has been plaguing me for the last few years.*

*"Is this even doing anything? If this stuff is real, why isn't it making a difference? God, if I was a better healer, I would be able to get rid of those tumours," I begin thinking to myself as I am overcome with a mix of grief, doubt and sheer futility.*

*The six week window I have with my sister ends way too soon. After this short time, the responsibilities of a young family call me back to my adopted home and my older children in Canada. As I prepare to say goodbye to Angelique and leave the hospice this evening, I force myself to stuff down every ounce of emotion that I feel with a rough and callous hand. I can barely carry the soul shattering grief that threatens to suffocate me so I find some unknown place deep inside and I push my broken heart into this dark hole. I need to be numb or I'll never be able to leave. As I hug my sister goodbye, I hold her head like I have often held my sleeping*

*babies, cradling her gently against my shoulder, hoping I won't hurt her fragile and broken form.*

*On the endless plane ride back to Canada, I cling to my baby boy the entire way, thanking God for the distraction of the young life in my arms. I feel as if I am in shock as I watch myself somehow endure the arduous flight, knowing that I will never see my sister again. When I allow myself to think back on my time with Angelique and the energy healing that I did with her, I return to a pool of drowning self-doubt that I am now having over my healing abilities and alternate medicine in general.*

*"It didn't do anything, it didn't help. She is still dying. It made no difference at all," I tell myself in despair. It was all I had to give her – the only hope I had and it did nothing. Now all I have left is grief.*

*Back in Canada, I talk to my sister on the phone every few days while I hear the exhaustion in her voice and curse the distance and poor phone lines that are keeping us apart. She still has some good days that allow her to leave the hospice she has moved into, and we talk about her day trips to the mountains and her farewell sojourns to the vast blue ocean of our youth. Our calls no longer last for hours anymore. She tires easily and I reluctantly let her go, weeping distraughtly after I hang up the phone. As the weeks creep on, however, her outings become fewer and farther between as the shackle of the cancer closes tighter, a usurping tyrant that will not be halted. The utter helplessness I feel being so far away is totally disarming and I feel lost as I float through my days in Canada. I am totally betrayed by time in what feels like a dishonest and treacherous reneging; we should have had a lifetime together, there was supposed to be more time.*

*As I lie in bed one evening, halfway between waking and sleep, my thoughts turn to Angelique. Despite my recent doubts about any healing ability that I might have or the effectiveness of this alternate practice, I begin sending her energy. My exhaustion and a desperate wish to connect with her and do something, anything to help, overcomes all self-imposed uncertainty and all I do is send her love.*

*As I run the energy I feel it flowing strongly and I find my conscious mind slip away from the reality of my bedroom. With my eyes closed I focus on the love I feel for Angelique and I watch memories of our childhood float past my inner eye. Gradually I begin to notice an image appear before me; a vision that doesn't come from my imagination or memories. I see my sister floating free, shining like an angel that is covered in light. As she basks in the glow of hidden warmth from a source I cannot see, she turns her head to look at me and then she smiles. That smile is blissful and full of peace and the love in her eyes catches at my heart. As I see this image float in front of me, I feel astonished and detached as if I am watching it on a movie screen.*

*I know I am not creating this figure with my imagination – it feels real, like a message that Angelique is sending me. The warmth of sudden tears falling down my cheeks breaks my concentration and I let them fall while I bury my head in my pillow. Instead of utter desolation and uselessness, however, tonight I feel love and a deep, honest regret and loss.*





The details of the days that followed this energy treatment are blurred in my memory, lost to the overwhelming grief that took me when my sister passed away. In her final days, Angelique was engulfed with another bout of crippling pain that was fierce enough to force her back to bed. This onslaught increased and this time advanced through the last defenses that she had been holding. She passed away in excruciating agony, finally releasing the pain that she had battled for more than half her life. I was devastated beyond words, lost in the surreal experience of something I could barely imagine being true.

As I talked with my brother after Angelique passed, I asked him for details of her last moments and days, anything that he could share no matter how distressing. I desperately needed to make it all real, to make it different from the homesickness that had already been missing her for the last four years. Now I had to miss her for the rest of my life, with no lengthy phone calls or letters from home to distract me or ease my heartache.

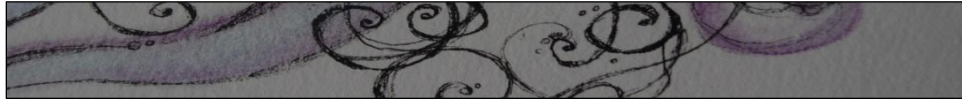
In response, my brother Damian gifted me with particulars and details that let me build my farewell images. In these stories of her passing, he told me that the day before Angelique fell into the final gripping fight that succeeded in taking her life, she was energized and vibrant, looking better than she had in the entire three months she had been sick. That small invigorating burst had allowed her to leave the hospice and spend some time with her close friends - a morning of company and talking, reminiscing and normality – as much as you can hope for when you only have days to live. Damian asked if I had given her an energy treatment and we calculated the time difference, figuring that the night I had that vision had indeed occurred prior to her last day trip out of palliative care.

These stories I heard from my brother became the memories that I pieced together of my sister's final days. I still hold on to the hope that they contained with a desperate grip, preferring them to the fact that I was thousands of miles away, unable to hold her hand or be there when she passed. In the grief of her death, the image of Angelique floating before me became a balm when my tears overwhelmed and when I thought of the energy that I had sent her, I felt a reassuring hand reach from beyond the veil. It was as if she was telling me not to give up and to not doubt this healing gift or ability that I was still discovering. In the moments when I might have waived and surrendered to the common social discourse that energy healing isn't real, she encouraged me to keep believing.



It was in this heavy fog of grief and annihilating loss that I found myself returning to academia and beginning graduate school in the College of Medicine. Two days after I returned from Angelique's funeral in Australia, I attended my first class. When I think back to my memories of these early days, these recollections are filled with self-imposed silencing and the concealment of my true feelings. Absolutely certain that I would not be able to hold my grief at

bay, I hid the fact that my sister had just passed away from everyone that I met. My return to grad school came with a mandate of absolute censorship and a return to my protective habit of false facades and hidden identities.



This story has moved in and out of my thesis as I wondered where it would fit and what message it would carry. I found it difficult to write; not because of the grief that surfaced when I penned it; it was because I was afraid of how it would sound when I mentioned I had seen a vision. Part of me is still cautious and vulnerable because I know how unbelievable it sounds. Do I think it was real? Well, yes. I can still see it now: the view of my sister, floating and angelic. It makes me smile and calms the tension I realize I am holding in my chest.

Another reason that this tale is so difficult to tell is the glaring admission of doubt that threads its way through my words: doubt in a modality that I am trying to defend in my thesis and doubt in myself as a healer who is trying to speak with confidence and authority. If I have stumbled and fallen, if I have had misgivings and uncertainties, how can I address the potential scepticism of my audience? How can I speak of this hidden world if I admit that there have been moments when I wasn't sure I believed in it myself?

As I sit for a moment and think about the inclusion of this story, there is something that is encouraging me and urging me to keep it. This tale is an exploration of vulnerability; something intimate and personal that reveals the stumbling, doubting, human experience that is a fundamental component of my energy healing story. In sharing these hidden fears that lie cowering behind my words, I realize that they are just as much a part of my research as the inspirational and emotive elements that I have been trying to share. With that realization, I nod to myself and decide to keep this tale where it is.



With the strict personal instructions that bade me keep silent about my sister's death, I approached my first semester in the College of Medicine with a quiet withdrawn countenance. As I listened to the conversations in the hallways and classrooms, I heard many opinions and practices that were grounded in a western biomedical paradigm. When I held them up and compared them against my own I saw a glaring difference in fundamental beliefs and everyday assumptions. I don't know if this introspection and self-awareness would have been possible if I had been more forthright and outspoken about my alternate health background but in the self-silencing that I imposed, I began to sense that I didn't fully belong in the academic world that I was entering. As I tried to navigate this new chapter in my life and step into this new identity as a grad student, I found my days filled with a sense of vulnerability and a familiar feeling that I needed to guard what I said. This private censoring mandate reinforced the routine I had adopted

years ago when I kept my opinions and perspectives to myself. Once more, I learnt to walk in two diametrically opposing worlds, keeping them separate and hiding my energy healer identity.



## **Vulnerability**

*It is late afternoon and the bright Saskatchewan winter sun streams through the full length windows of the meeting room. The sky is a bright, cobalt blue in a shade that reminds me of a hot summer's day in Australia. Of course, the pillows of snow that cover everything in sight also remind me that I'm not in Melbourne anymore. It still catches me even after ten years in Canada: the briefest of moments when I momentarily forget how far away from home I really am.*

*My department meeting has just finished and half of the people have remained, taking the opportunity to gather and talk to fellow students and other university faculty. Our department has put out wine and finger food to encourage social interactions and to build community in a department where students are usually doing their own thing. With no obvious friends or familiar faces in the room, I pack my bag and intend to leave but a fellow student comes up and engages me in conversation. I'm pleased for the connection and the small reprieve from the isolation I sometimes feel on campus. Another student soon joins us and before long, talk turns to questions about my area of research. I try to explain what I'm doing in as few words as possible: an autoethnographic study into alternate medicine. I keep my description brief as I gauge the response of my audience, fully depending on their reactions to decide whether I expand on that description and tell them more.*

*I recognize this vague reference to my research as a protective mechanism that speaks to the vulnerability I feel regarding my work, particularly within university walls. I make a conscious choice not to say the words 'energy healing' until I have had time to check in and read the acceptance of the people in front of me. In the past I've mentioned my fascination with alternate medicine at university and I have received mixed responses. In my research methodology class in the College of Education, groups of people came up to me during the break, telling me stories about their own positive experiences with alternate health as they encouraged my work and asked me questions. As they shared their own interest with these healing modalities, I remember being shocked by the positivity of their reactions. That shock contrasts with the other responses that I have had on the campus.*

*My graduate program began in the College of Medicine and most of my classes were held in the old University hospital, a building whose warren of hallways gave me the impression of venerability, tradition and hushed reverence. I remember crossing the threshold and immediately being on guard as if I was trespassing in some strict and sober institution; I felt that I could be there because I was interested in health but if I mentioned alternate medicine too loudly I would immediately trip some silent alarm. As I kept my promise to myself to not talk about the loss of my sister, I listened attentively to the conversations around me, in the classroom and in the esteemed halls. I thought that if it got out that I believed in that 'hokey stuff', then my*

*credentials would be shot and I would be viewed as an interloper who had no real business being there at all. Now whenever I mention what I'm doing to people that I don't know, I say it slowly, gauging their response, testing the water to see if I'm going to be branded a charlatan or a fool.*

So what is it about my research that makes me feel vulnerable? Why is it difficult to talk about energy healing within certain university spaces? What am I afraid will happen if I talk about alternate medicine in public?

I wrote the following journal entry at the beginning of this thesis project, capturing the terror that I felt about my impending exposure and outing to the academic community. At this point I haven't been able to answer these questions yet; I am still struggling with my fears.



Journal entry: 20 March, 2013.

As I begin exploring my deeper hidden stories about energy healing for my thesis, there are a number of fears clambering for attention, scrambling to the surface in an attempt to be recognized as the biggest impediment to sharing my written work. Vulnerability... there it is, hovering in an obvious way; a mantle under which numerous other silent apprehensions are hiding, the smaller issues hoping that they never be discovered. I'm about to pour my soul out, literally, and send it off into the world. I know that I want to share my inner thoughts, beliefs and feelings in this project and that the finished product will be an intensely personal labor of love. I also know that in doing so, I will lose that careful, calculated moment when I slowly reveal myself, testing the waters and discerning the reader's position on what I am about to say, before I say more. In writing this thesis, I sign over all rights to hold back and water down my argument, changing tact, diverting attention from what I really believe. This is about full disclosure, in all of its naked glory. When I write this, I am officially outed and there is no going back.



Before I began this thesis, I was nervous and apprehensive, knowing that I was about to begin a profoundly personal journey but I wasn't sure exactly what it was that I was about to say. I believed I was going to be describing the phenomenon of energy healing as I knew it and I was afraid of owning that identity out loud for the world to see. Now that I have begun writing, I have shared personal stories and learnt more than I had anticipated, and I don't know that I feel

as vulnerable as I did at the start of this adventure. The writing process that I have undertaken has lead me inwards on a journey of self-discovery and what I have found in my tales of self-silencing and doubt has lead to a new budding self-awareness. As I continue to write, I see myself clearer and my vulnerability around owning this alternate health identity isn't as terrifying as it was when I began.

And while I brace myself with my new self-awareness and acknowledge that I am no longer terrified of what this thesis will contain, I must admit there is still a slight hesitation. I notice a small element of doubt whose tendrils of concern are hiding at the back of my mind, holding me back and whispering that I should still worry about reactions to my work. This concern applies to me in a way that is not the same for my energy healing teachers. I know that my vulnerability springs from my position within the academy. In the gilded halls of academia, I still need to be careful how I speak.



*As I walk into the hotel banquet room, I look around at the milling people talking in small groups. I am at a presentation on research into complementary and alternate medicine (CAM) that is being hosted by the College of Medicine. I don't see anyone that I know so I make my way to the drink station and pour myself a cup of tea. As I balance the tiny hotel cup and saucer in my hand I wonder what perspective the presentation will take. Biomedicine isn't always supportive of alternate healing paradigms. As I move around the room and find myself a seat, I notice the space is full of alumni from the medical program at the university. Many of them have name tags on with the year that they graduated and I imagine that the small groups that are congregating together are old colleagues reconnecting after many years. After I have settled myself in my seat, a woman walks towards the microphone at the front of the room and makes an announcement that the presentation is ready to begin.*

*After the speaker has finished presenting her summation of the current academic research into CAM, she asks for feedback or questions from the audience in the room. An older gentleman stands up straight away and makes his way to the microphone. I recognize him from some of my seminars at school and I know that he is a retired local physician.*

*When he speaks, he has a knowing and direct tone to his voice; it is the kind of tone that reflects a person clearly assured of his opinion. As he turns his head slightly to acknowledge and include his fellow physicians in his comments, I get the impression that he believes he is speaking as a representative of his profession.*

*"I'd like to thank the speaker today for what has been a very informative presentation. I would also like to acknowledge the importance of the entire CAM research direction. This work is important for the future of complementary medicine because, in my experience, CAM often has the reputation of disguising its true nature which is scam!"*



*As he turns away from the microphone, he chuckles to himself, obviously pleased with his witty banter. There are murmurs in the crowd but I am too stunned to get a sense of whether they agree with what he has just said. I am aghast that he could be so disrespectful to the presenter he has just listened to and I wonder if he realizes the derision contained in his thinly veiled words. Maybe he is oblivious; perhaps he assumes everyone has the same opinion as him. Or maybe he knows full well that he is reinforcing the ideology that there is only one way to practice medicine. I don't know.*

*What I do know is that his comment reinforces my perceptions that the biomedical world is hostile and un-accepting towards my alternate health paradigm. Not only is my belief system considered quackery, but his remark implies that alternate health practitioners are frauds that are trying to swindle their clients. To me, his call for continued research feels like a matter of public safety and concern, rather than an avenue to increase understanding and knowledge. I sense that he expects future CAM research to stamp out practices that do not conform to traditional gold standard investigations. I wonder what he would think of my work. I fear it would be cut down quickly.*

*These are the voices that I hear around me in academia. They produce a power dynamic in the worlds that I inhabit where the dominant voices can be accusing, derogatory and dismissive towards my alternate health ontology. How can my little voice stand up against such disparaging and deprecating insults? How do I, a new graduate student, arm myself with a defense against comments such as these? This is why I am cautious and why I feel vulnerable when I speak.*



Although this trepidation sits at the back of my writing, concerning itself with the reaction to my work, something has happened in the crafting of this project that bolsters my confidence to speak of transrational ontologies and other ways of knowing.

As I continued my graduate education, eventually I left my old department in the College of Medicine and I stumbled across small pockets of air that encouraged me to stand up and speak with the voice that I had kept quiet for years. In these supportive and safe spaces, where health and healing was not the bread and butter of the department, mainstream biomedical concepts were no longer defended tooth and nail. As I walked away from environments where I felt like an outsider, I discovered conversations about paradigms and epistemologies that welcomed my alternate perspective with open arms. I found room to talk about what I knew beyond the measurement of machines and the view from a microscope, and when I spoke, what I had seen and experienced as an energy healer was met with interest and respect. In these safe and encouraging environments, I was reassured that silencing in any form limits us to somebody else's way of thinking and in an effort to escape these rigid confines, our own individual stories should be told – not only to expand what we talk about but how we talk about them.

As I make steps towards sharing my story within an academic space, I feel that I am stretching beyond the confines of positivist explorations both in topic and in methodology. I am

finally being encouraged to speak of what has moved me and what I have hidden from view for far too long. Talking from the heart within academia confirms that what I know matters (Wall, 2006).

And so, regardless of my fears that I will be exposed and potentially labeled a fraud or misguided fool, I am shouldered up with a certainty that I have a story to tell and that story deserves to be heard. I believe to my core that we all have ontological leanings and firmly held beliefs, some of which will change and soften, and others that will be held close and unyielding until the last of our days. But our stories lie beyond these worldviews and paradigms. They exist as the threads that tie us all together, weaving our lives and hearts within the giant fabric that is humanity. I don't speak to you now so that I can be labeled and judged, or to convince you that my way of being is the right one. I speak to you so that I can share my story, one that I have lived and breathed, one that is uniquely my own.

In the crafting of this individual heart-filled narrative, as I have birthed my stories and relived my own experiences and memories; I have also been led down a path of self-discovery. The following tale is a glimpse of me stumbling across another piece of self-awareness.



## **Belonging**

*It is an hour before dinner time and the autumn sun has already moved into its lazy late afternoon performance. The shadows stretch out as if they are yawning and the receding light that is a remnant of the warm sunny day moves slowly, its touch lingering as long as it can before it must slip away. Winter is impatiently waiting on the sidelines, sending cooler nights to rush the preceding season along, turning the leaves on the trees before I am ready and bidding adieu to the flowers in the yard. I love autumn with her vibrant colours and the smell of fallen leaves – a close-your-eyes-and-take-a-deep-breath kind of smell that reminds me of home. As a child I would spend hours playing in the mountains that our giant oak tree created with each passing breeze. To this day that smell reminds me of adventures and daydreams and days that last forever.*

*The pace of those longer days is different here in Saskatchewan; autumn passes through her role upon the stage a little quicker than her antipodean presentation. Her time in the spotlight is totally dependent on the timing of the first snow fall when impatient winter declares enough is enough and brazenly trumpets her arrival. After that, the leaves that have dallied too long on the branches become frozen and wither instantly and 'fall' as they call it here, bows her head in defeat. Knowing how short this season is, I would like to stay outside a little longer to enjoy these fleeting moments but it is time to head inside for the back to school routine where dinner is on time and kids go to bed early. So I pull out the bag of potatoes and I start peeling.*

*When the phone rings and I see on the caller ID that it is my friend Teresa<sup>15</sup>, I pick it up without a second thought, tucking it under my chin so that my two hands are free to keep moving. We catch up when we can so a quick conversation between washing potatoes and pulling dinner out of the oven is nothing out of the ordinary. We usually speak of children and projects; my thesis, the book she is writing and whatever else comes to mind. Today she tells me about a blog she occasionally follows and the backlash that has erupted around the author who was observed making a social faux pas in the public eye.*

*“Mmmm, I don’t think I could do that – to write a blog and be so exposed,” I say as my face contorts into a grimace and I think about my own indiscretions and human failings.*

*“I know,” Teresa agrees. “I would never want to be that vulnerable. I don’t want the whole world seeing into my private life,” she assures me and I tell her I’m in total agreement.*

*As soon as I hear those words, I’m struck with the irony of the similarities between this woman’s blog and my thesis. Here I am sharing my inner most thoughts and personal tales in a project that anyone will be able to read and I wonder just how different the two forums really are. While that thought passes through my mind, a mild feeling of revulsion still hovers in my stomach at the thought of being in the public eye.*

*“I guess that her blog is kind of like my thesis,” I say. “I know that when I first started writing it I was terrified of being so vulnerable and exposed. But now that I have written most of it, I know what I have said and I’m ok with sharing it. Before that, I didn’t know what I would write.”*

*“God, it all comes back to my fear of being visible,” I tell Teresa as I verbalize the tangent my mind has suddenly moved onto. And then I explain.*

*“There is this theme that has been running through my thesis – vulnerability and my fear of being visible – as it applies to my role as an energy healer and my own personal relationship with feeling exposed and open to criticism,” I tell her.*

*“Ok,” she says, trying to follow my words and the abrupt turnaround in the direction our conversation has taken.*

*“See, when I talked to my teachers about energy healing, they didn’t feel vulnerable and exposed like I did. I think part of the reason why is that they don’t have to exist within academia. They have their own private practices and if people want to see them, then they arrive with an idea that energy work or some form of alternate healing is going to happen. My teachers don’t need to defend themselves to the degree that I feel I have to when I’m in school,” I say.*

*“Go on,” Teresa encourages me as I stop peeling potatoes and stare intently at the cutting board, my mind transported into deep thought.*

*“There is also the part where both of them have been doing this work for so long, that they are sure of themselves and the paradigms that they work within; it is what they do. Quite simply, if someone doesn’t have the same beliefs, then that’s ok. I feel like I’m still a novice and*

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<sup>15</sup> Teresa agreed to have her own name used in this project.



*because I don't do energy work full time, I spend most of my day navigating worlds where it isn't the socially accepted norm. Therefore I run into situations where I have to defend myself and this way of thinking more often than they do," I finish.*

*"So, I'm not sure that the theme of vulnerability can be considered a universal theme that applies to energy healing in general because not all healers feel this way about their work. I'm sure that there are some that are exposed to society's prejudices and negative impressions just like I feel when I'm at university but I don't think that healers generally hide themselves away on purpose. What stands out for me when I look at this theme is the continuing idea that I don't want to be exposed or vulnerable and because of that desire to fly under the radar, I experience energy healing in this way," I say as I follow my internal thoughts along their own meandering pathways.*

*"Ok," says Teresa. "And who can blame you. I would hate to have to defend myself all of the time," she laments. "When you are talking about something that people might not react well to, or there is a chance they will roll their eyes or scrunch their nose up at you, that isn't pleasant. We all want positive reactions, especially when it's something that is important to us," she says.*

*"I know. Who wants to be judged? I have always been the shy kid in school that didn't want to put her hand up or answer questions; I never wanted to draw attention to myself or stand out in any way. I really didn't want to be seen," I say as I reminisce about my hand made school uniform that I wore in primary school and the way I always felt different and less important than my peers.*

*As I go back to peeling potatoes, I think about my younger school years.*

*"It really is this weird dynamic between the clear horror I felt as a kid whenever the attention was on me, and the way I think now that I am a grown up. I guess that you see the world a lot differently when you are an adult," I say to Teresa.*

*"Well, yeah, you grow up and the things that worried you as a kid aren't a big deal anymore," she replies.*

*"But something in my reluctance to stand up and say that I am an energy healer reminds me of being that young kid in primary school. I don't want to be different – I don't want to be excluded and left out," I lament.*

*"Well, I don't think you are different," Teresa comforts me and I feel the support of a friend that knows me well. "You just have a different perspective on health than mainstream medicine. And I get that. There are lots of people that think the same way that you do," she says.*

*"Thanks," I say and I give a soft laugh as I am drawn out of my deep introspection. "Well, sorry for getting all serious there for a moment. OK, well, I'm going to have to go. Time for me to get back to making dinner: and my neck is getting sore from holding the phone like this," I laugh again as my sombre thoughts slip away and I come back into the moment of potatoes and dinner plans.*

*“Yeah me too; I have to see what there is in the fridge to cook,” she says. “I’ll talk to you later. Good luck with working it all out.”*

*As I hang up and get back to my meal preparations, I let my mind linger on the topic of not belonging. It is slightly different from being visible and vulnerable; the topic I thought I was going to address. I guess I keep quiet about being a healer when I meet someone new because I don’t want to be seen as an outsider – someone who isn’t ‘normal’. Then I laugh at my own thought.*

*“God, what’s normal anyway?” I think to myself.*

*After I put the scalloped potatoes in the oven, I set the alarm and steal outside to soak up the late afternoon sun. With the kids preoccupied by scooters and playing with friends down the street, I take the opportunity to think more about this theme of vulnerability.*

*I know that my tale about energy healing comes with a discussion about vulnerability and being exposed within the academy. I’ve already written about that – and for me it is quite clear that social constructs and mainstream medicine have created an environment where the phenomenon of energy healing may elicit negative reactions and judgment.*

*But what is behind my personal fear and vulnerability?*

*I realize that deep down I believe that when I am visible, I open myself up to the possibility of being exposed, judged and labeled as different just as I was when I first talked about my acupuncture studies with my friends*

*“I want to belong,” I say to myself.*

*“Aha,” I laugh. Another personal insight that comes with a new understanding of myself and a shift in my perspective. “Vulnerability is only part of the puzzle. The deeper issue is that I don’t want to be excluded and alone.”*



When I think about the theme of not belonging, I see it repeating at different times in my life. Even in this project, the stories that I have shared have taken this notion and held it up for me to recognize. The key thought running through my head when I kept quiet about my identity as an energy healer within academia was that I didn’t want to be excluded, I wanted to belong. I didn’t want to be shunned and left out.

As I think about my desperate desire to belong and the emotions that go with it, I see a human condition: a vulnerable admission that is not often encouraged in academia. My personal recognition is a confession about deeply intimate fears and from certain perspectives, this private declaration has no place being aired in such a public academic venue. Writing in an autoethnographic voice, however, allows me to be whole – to capture all of these elements and to bring them into the light. Now that I see how often I have given myself away and kept quiet so

that I might belong, I take a moment to think about who I might be if I allowed myself to be whole.

My exploration of my story about energy healing has led me down roads that are unpaved and strewn with stones and potholes that have tripped me and caused me to stumble. Writing in an autoethnographic voice has allowed me include these humble voices; those that are afraid, those that doubt and those that have been hidden from view, even from myself. This journey has been as much a learning process for me as it has been a sharing of what I know. I have seen myself in a new light and have come to accept the part of this story that exists in the shadows. The new understanding that I have, not only of myself but about the phenomenon of energy healing, came in response to some simple questions. As I made my way through the various drafts and incarnations of this thesis, Lee, my committee member, asked me:

“What did I hold back? What did I not say?”

Just as important as the inspiring descriptions and information that I wanted to share about energy healing, the contemplation and answers to these questions from Lee led me to a greater understanding, one that feels authentic and more complete. In liberating the unacknowledged voices within my personal story, I feel that I am no longer afraid to speak.

As I settle into this new perspective and reflect on the growth that I have undergone, another story rises up, ready to appear in these pages: a story about an energy healing treatment.



### **An energy healing treatment**

*It is a chilly Saskatchewan winter's night with ice under foot and steam coming with every breath. This place is as far away from home as I can imagine, frozen and white in the depths of winter, with bright skies of a deep cobalt blue and frigid air that bites relentlessly at every inch of exposed skin. It is 15 years since I first felt lifeforce in my undergrad program and now, I am working as an energy healer in a small clinic space that I share with other therapists.*

*Despite the early trepidation that filled the years after I first learnt this energy healing modality, I eventually overcame my own self-doubt and began offering healing treatments. I think that the support I felt flowing from my sister after she died had a lot to do with this shift in my personal perspective; that and the support and encouragement of my close friends.*

*Before I left for my appointment this evening, I heated a rice bag in the microwave and wrapped it in a blanket to insulate it and keep it warm. It takes a while to throw off the winter chill when you come inside from the bone snapping cold. When my client Tinuviel<sup>16</sup> arrives I ask her how she is feeling and I take in the tired tension at the side of her eyes as she explains she has a migraine coming on.*

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<sup>16</sup> This is a pseudonym that my client picked for herself that means daughter of the starry twilight.

*“If it had been any worse I would have had to cancel the appointment,” she says as she climbs straight onto the massage table.*

*As I pass her the warm rice bag and cover her with the blanket, she gets comfortable and thanks me for the forethought. With her eyes closed, I sense the strain that limits any idle chatter lest it aggravate the pain and I respond by moving straight into my healing routine. I settle into my chair at the head of the table and close my own eyes, placing my hands on Tinuviel’s shoulders. As I slip away from the errant thoughts parading through my mind, I feel as if I have taken off a heavy and restrictive winter coat that has been weighing me down and limiting my movement. Releasing the layers of distractions, my mind becomes quiet and I begin to focus on the task at hand.*

*As I bring my attention to Tinuviel, I shift my feet, positioning them so that they are flat on the floor so that I can further ground my mind and sharpen my concentration. I send a reaching thought out through my soles, sending it towards the earth below me and in response my feet begin to tingle. The background noise of people walking past the clinic and traffic on the nearby street becomes muted as my awareness narrows to this small quiet room. I notice the soft weave of the blanket under my waiting hands and I hear the furnace rumble as it tries to keep pace with this chilly winter’s night.*

*As the world around me becomes quiet, I take a deep breath, letting the last vestiges of the day fall silently to the floor. Holding onto the rhythm of the moving air, I use my breath to lead me inwards, narrowing my focus further still until even the room that I sit in becomes a distant destination. I no longer notice the cool wall by my side or the press of the massage table against my leg as my focus moves inwards and I tune into the sensations that arrive beyond the limitations of physical touch.*

*In the stillness I set an intention for the healing session, throwing it like a net over the proceedings of the next half an hour, casting it in simple words that don’t disturb the quiet of my pensive state.*

*“Let go. Release ... release,” I hear my deep inner voice sigh as I exhale with each word. In response, I feel the tension in my own chest and shoulders melt away with each outward breath and I hold that physical example up and project it back to Tinuviel’s migraine.*

*I then move my hands to Tinuviel’s head and bring my awareness to my fingers as I search for the soft depression of her temples. With my hands resting lightly on her skin, I feel her pulse as it moves beneath my fingertips. Ready to begin moving energy, I draw on my yoga studies and my Quantum touch training. They both link the subtle energy of the universe with the breath, so I take a long inhalation that moves deeply into my lungs, expanding my rib cage and filling my entire chest. This healing breath is a drawn out and audible ujjayi<sup>17</sup> breath, reminding*

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<sup>17</sup> Ujjayi breathing is a technique that is used in some yoga practices and is often performed whilst doing the physical form or asana. It is sometimes called ‘the ocean breath’ because of the audible noise that the individual makes whilst performing this breath. Ujjayi breathing is conducted with a deep diaphragmatic breath that first fills the lower belly, then the lower rib cage area and then finally, it fills the upper chest and throat. As the practitioner inhales and exhales through the nose, the ‘ocean sound’ is created by moving or stretching the glottis which

*me of waves rolling slowly onto a deserted back beach at dusk. In the quiet of the clinic space at night, my breath echoes loudly around the room and the rhythm of its even, measured cadence helps move me further into my meditative state.*

*With each deep inhalation, I feel the flow of life force as it move inwards, gathering in my chest as my lungs expand. When I have reached the depths of my in-breath, I exhale, sending the collected energy out along my arms and through my gently resting fingers. In response, I feel the tingly feeling that I recognize from my years of doing this work. It resonates along my arms and in the fleshy parts of my hands – electric and alive as if all of my nerve endings have been woken up and are now ready and expectant.*

*These steps have become my energy healing process; the separate components that I commit to each time that I do this work. They happen quickly in my first few breaths and lead me directly into the contemplative mindset where I connect with this healing world. After I move through these phases, I find my mind intensely quiet and still and I notice a euphoric floating quality to all of my perceptions. As each thought appears in my mind, my awareness bobs away gently and without much effort, responding to these ideas as if I was pushing a boat across a still pool of water. As the ripples of these thoughts continue reaching outwards, I sense different things – always beyond words and more expressive than I am ever able to capture with language.*

*When I work with Tinuviel this evening, I turn these initial thoughts towards my hands and move them from her temples to the back of her head. Here, I tune my awareness to what they sense so that I may work directly with the migraine pain. I feel a tension that I intuitively know is the pain that I'm looking for. The imbalance is so obvious and solid that I cannot remove the image from my mind. I float to the surface and try to give this sensation words that will describe it for Tinuviel.*

*"I can feel your migraine. It is like a metal plate has been screwed onto your skull ... and those screws have been turned too tightly," I explain as I reflect on what I have just sensed.*

*Having found the source of Tinuviel's pain, I move to address it directly and gather my focus close around me, moving back into my insulated thoughts. I take a long, deep breath and feel the life force swell and expand in my chest, bustling to be released. When I exhale, I push this gathered pulsing ball away from me, the healing energy now moving with a volition of its own. Attached within this tumbling, rolling movement of breath and flowing life force is my intention, woven intimately amidst the current of moving power. Each time that I exhale, I release my will and drive it towards the tension within Tinuviel's skull, overriding it and flooding it completely with energy that aims to convince it to release its tenacious grip.*

*As the session goes on, I move my hands to different acupuncture points on Tinuviel's head as their locations float up to my conscious mind. I do not logically think about these points or cognitively assess which ones would be useful in this session, I just respond to the arrival of this information as it appears before me. As I readjust my fingers and send energy through these*

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*narrows the pathway that the air is travelling through. This action creates an audible rushing sound as the practitioner breathes in and out in even, measured breaths (Johari, 2000).*

*locations, I continue to feel the swell of flowing life force like a wave gathering momentum each time it assails the beach.*

*At the end of the half hour treatment when the session time is up, my awareness of my physical reality gradually returns. I begin to hear noises outside in the alley as people walk past and dogs in the neighbouring streets bark in response. As I look around the room I see the darkness of the evening peak through gaps in the blinds and I cannot help but shiver at the thought of the patient winter cold, waiting to escort me home. Tinuviel is lying quietly on the table, her restful breathing telling me she is still far from here. Moving quietly so I don't disturb her rest, I place my hands together in a gesture of gratitude and bow my head, thanking the universe around me for the privilege of being of service. As my mind still lingers in this healing space, I feel humility that I have been witness to the movement of this healing energy that although I was connected to, moved with its own momentum and power.*

*Now that the treatment is over and my awareness returns to my physical world, I feel the stiffness in my back and shoulders that has settled into my joints during the session. As I stretch my arms above my head and move in my chair, I send a resounding creak through the old wooden floorboards that echoes around the silence in the room. Tinuviel stirs and takes a deep breath, opening her eyes and blinking at the sudden influx of light. She looks a little refreshed in a sleepy kind of way as she frees her arms from under the blanket and rubs her hands over her face.*

*"Take it easy and don't try to get up too suddenly," I caution her as I take her arm, helping her to sit up, waiting for her to get her bearings.*

*"Thank you," she says, her voice sounding as if it is caked in sleep.*

*"How are you feeling?" I ask as I watch her check in with the pain that had followed her into the clinic this evening.*

*"Better... the migraine is still there... but the pain isn't any worse," she explains.*

*I am sure she sees the twinge of disappointment in my eyes and she quickly goes on.*

*"But that is a good thing because that never happens. Once a migraine begins, there is nothing that can stop it."*

*I find myself wishing that the treatment had been more successful and that she was pain-free.*

*"Perhaps if the treatment was longer ... maybe if I concentrated harder. Maybe I'm not good enough" I catch myself thinking but I stop my thoughts abruptly quickly stomping out my old pattern of self-doubt.*

*To address my uncertainty and personal reservations I remind myself that this isn't my healing journey but that of Tinuviel's. A tenet of energy healing work is that the individual is responsible for their own healing and my role is to connect them to the life force and let them take it from there. I still wish the migraine had gone away but I force my thinking to see the*

*positive sign that the pain has stopped progressing and I hope that it offers Tinuviel some measure of relief.*

*As I drive home after the treatment the ice on the side of the road sparkles from the lights of my car and errant snowflakes press themselves against my windscreen. The beauty of this frozen landscape never ceases to amaze me and I admit that I have been bewitched by the falling snow. With the heat cranked as high as it can go, I have forgotten my earlier doubt and I sing along with every song on the radio, feeling content and blissful as I float home. When I arrive back in my driveway, I'm still humming as I get out of the car. The whole world seems to have retreated behind closed doors this evening and everything is absolutely still and close, all sound muffled by the hills of fallen snow. When I walk into the house, I go straight to the bedrooms and I kiss my sleeping children on the head as my open heart overflows with the love I feel for them. That is one of the gifts of doing this kind of work; the love that it connects me to. It is as if my chest has been cracked open and inside I can only find joy. I think about the act of being a conduit for this healing energy and the way that some of the life force that I draw into me, seeps off and helps me too. I'm buzzing yet peaceful and reflective as I see everything through a lens of beauty and gratitude for the gift of life.*

*The next day I get an email from Tinuviel thanking me for the treatment and telling me about the rest of her evening. She says that by the time that she got home, her headache had lessened but she was cautious and didn't allow herself to get excited about it. By the time that she went to sleep, her pain had disappeared entirely. She assures me that in the 35 years that she has been plagued with migraines, this has never happened to her before. Nothing has ever been able to stop the pain in its tracks, let alone make it go away. Tears instantly well in my eyes as I'm overwhelmed with emotions.*

*"Oh my God, it worked," I tell myself, feeling relief for Tinuviel and at the same time, reassurance for me.*

*I think about the treatment last night and know that I had given it everything I had, concentrating as hard as I could to try to affect Tinuviel's pain. When it hadn't abated, I was filled with self-doubt and although I had shut down those thoughts, stifling them before they could fester or take hold, they had still managed to escape as subtle whispers in the back of my mind. I chastise myself quietly and reinforce the lesson from my energy healing training: that I can't control the outcomes of my treatments. The energy is going to go wherever it is going to go! And last night it pushed Tinuviel's migraine away. As my doubt scampers away, I am left feeling excited and extremely happy. I find myself perched on the edge of my seat as I lean forward and reply to Tinuviel's email.*

*"It worked, it worked," I say to myself, a grin firmly affixed to my face.*

*"Remember this," I tell myself. "And don't forget it."*





As a writer and an artist exploring the phenomenon of energy healing, I have strained with every effort that I can gather to capture a description of this otherworldly phenomenon here upon the page. My sense after reflecting on all of my stories and experiences is that energy healing is best described in simple terms that allude to a personal relationship that an individual must discover for themselves.

In my journey to understand the phenomena of energy healing, which became a voyage of self-discovery, I have looked through my memories, following my stories with the illumination of a questioning mind. In recalling these tales I have gone looking for the private inner nuances that portray *my* experiences of this phenomenon. What I have found hiding in my recollections are tales of felt sensations, insecurities, doubt and self-silencing and my personal struggle with the social acceptance of this much maligned phenomenon. In capturing these memories in writing I have discovered elements of my personal story about energy healing that I did not know before I began. And even though I have come so far, I know that there is still much more to learn.



### Chapter Three: Elements of Energy Healing

#### My energy healing process

*I am sitting at my desk, listening to the kettle brewing, waiting for the bell to ring to tell me it has boiled. The ubiquitous cup of tea is a grounding and inspirational lifeline when I write; it reminds me of my sister and the Sunday mornings when we would read the paper together. As I take a slow and careful sip of the fresh cup that I've just poured, I use that moment to see what words and stories appear, rising up from my heart, hoping to appear on the page. As I read over what I have just written, I let my hand linger on the handle of my mug, a hand thrown piece from a local potter. I love the layers of pleasure that I find in my tea, from the tactile delight of the bumps and ridges on the cup – subtle evidence that another human being has crafted what I now hold in my hand – to the warmth that physically embraces me, spreading throughout my chest and eliciting a contented sigh.*

*As I sit and wait for the words to appear, I watch as a question bubbles up in my mind.*

*“What is it that you do when you do energy work?”*

*I scribble down this query and think that it is a perfect place to start. I want to talk to my teachers and ask them about energy healing and see what details appear in our conversations that are similar to my own. I also want to see what is different and what I can learn from these discussions.*

*Before I begin, however, I want to answer this question myself so that I can capture the details that reflect the processes and elements that I already know. To do this, I record my response in my journal: a hand written account with its old fashioned penmanship. The*



*scrawling script that I use is full of pauses where I stop to consider the steps of my healing method. As I hold the pen to my lips, I close my eyes and once more, listen as the words float into my mind.*



Journal entry: 23 August 2012

The very first thing that I do is to stop and take a deep breath. When I consider that first step, however, I see that there are so many nuances and elements that are involved in that stopping, that I must pause here and unravel them before I go on.

When I say that I stop, I mean that I halt the forward, ever-moving surge of my thoughts and I bring my awareness to this one precise moment that I find myself inhabiting. In that fraction of a second, when I consciously chose to fully inhabit this one specific moment, it feels as if I step outside of time. When I become aware of this individual instant, my whole body feels different and reacts to the change in attention. My breathing slows, my skin feels more alive and I notice the hairs on my arm and the material of my clothes as they press against me.



## **Stopping**

*I sit down with my friend and teacher Joyce in the dining room next to her small but well-loved kitchen. She already has the kettle boiling and pours me a cup of tea while I smile at how well she knows me. I met her over six years ago when she taught me the original energy healing modality that I learnt (Quantum Touch). Joyce is a massage therapist and energy healer and has been doing energy work for over 33 years. Given that she is a long time teacher of meditation and energy healing with training in seven different healing modalities, I have been turning to her with my healing related questions for as long as I've known her.*

*As Joyce brings over the steaming cup of tea, I thank her and then take my first tentative sip, careful not to burn my tongue. I slowly put the hot mug down on the table in front of me to let it cool and I watch Joyce as she settles into her chair with her own steaming brew. I'm here to talk about energy healing and my thesis and I have a long list of questions that I want to ask her. As I think them over and wrestle them into a semblance of order, I start from the beginning.*

*"What do you do when you do energy work?" I ask, throwing out my first question: a wide blanket query that could elicit many possible responses.*

*"I'm shifting energy," Joyce replies, smiling to herself and I wonder if she is observing the perfect simplicity of her answer.*

*"I like it – it's so uncomplicated," I say as I reflect on how ideal her first response is.*

*"Well, it is. Basically ... everything is energy – everything around us. From our physical bodies to our thoughts, our feelings, our intentions, and our beliefs; they are all energy. So, when you are doing energy work you are just shifting things ... and hopefully for the better," Joyce laughs.*

*I laugh too, appreciating Joyce's humour that won't let this conversation get too serious.*

*"So, do you have a step-by-step process that you follow?" I ask, leading her deeper into her reflections.*

*"Step by step – generally speaking, yes," she replies.*

*"There is kind of a recipe that I follow but it is different every time. Typically I start by grounding myself and setting an intention for what I want to be doing in the session," Joyce explains as I nod, recognizing my own similar steps. I'm not surprised that they are similar seeing as it was Joyce that taught them to me.*

*When Joyce talks the tone in her voice is subdued and reflective. I notice a quiet self-assurance that comes from decades of doing this work. When she answers my questions, she pauses to consider what I have just asked her and then she chooses her words carefully. I hear the teacher in her making sure that the information she is giving her student is correct.*

*I think about my own answer to this first question that I wrote in my journal and I ask Joyce about the act of stopping.*

*"When I looked at my process, I found that there was this instant before I began anything where I purposely stop thinking. I usually take a deep breath and commit to my energy healing process, as if I was setting my mind a new task to begin. But with that breath I let all the extraneous thoughts drop away. It is such a small – almost automatic step that I hadn't really thought about before. Do you do anything similar to that?" I ask.*

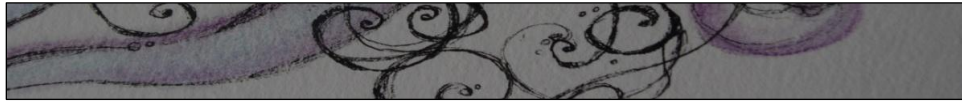
*"Well, yes," Joyce says as she pauses to consider my question. "I guess I would call it centering. It doesn't really matter what words you use, but for me, when I centre myself, I bring my awareness to this present moment. It is slightly different from what I do when I ground myself."*

*I hear the tone in her voice change as she considers the feelings and nuances that differentiate the two acts. I take a moment and do the same. As I take a breath and stop my thoughts, I feel my mind become quiet. Then I ground myself to the earth and my attention moves to my feet.*

*I agree and nod; they are different.*

*"When I centre myself I bring all of my thoughts to the here and now and I anchor my attention to this one particular moment in time. When I do that, I stop thinking about my past or the future and I step into the act of awareness. When I stop thinking and allow my mind to be quiet that is when I find clarity and perspective," Joyce explains.*

*When Joyce talks, I find myself hearing explanations of energy healing that I hadn't really thought about before. It surprises me a little and I clearly see the difference in our perspectives. I realize that I am truly a novice that is practicing the method and technique that I have been taught while Joyce understands the reasons for each step. When I go home after our illuminating conversation, I go back to my writing. I'm inspired by the depth of Joyce's understanding and I want to explore the elements of my healing practice a little further.*



*As I open up my laptop and wait for it to turn on, I think about the act of stopping and I wonder if there is a story that goes with this action - an anecdote that articulates the hurdy gurdy and then the moment when it is dropped and focus and direction remain in its stead.*

*As I wait, I answer a question from my youngest son.*

*"Yes, you can have a freezie. No, I don't have the scissors down here. Look on top of the kitchen bench," I yell up the stairs, hoping that I don't have to get up and interrupt my train of thought.*

*As the computer warms up, I think about the water fight the kids have just had in the yard and the pile of wet towels that are now waiting for me to wash. I think about dinner plans and wonder what everyone will want to eat after such a hot day. I look at the desk that I am working on and I see the container of ink pens interspersed with pencils and paintbrushes. They make me think about starting a drawing to explore what the concept of stopping means in the process of energy healing. I then consider the noise of extra children in the house and I think about the play date that is in progress and check the clock: 24 minutes until their mum picks them up.*

*"No, they aren't down here," I yell up to my youngest again, hoping he will find the scissors himself.*

*In the time that it takes me to write up to this point, my son and his friend find the scissors, eat three freezies apiece, complain that they are bored and ask if they can play on the Xbox. I ask them to leave the room that I'm working in and listen as they go to the bedroom next door and start playing air hockey. I then send a text message to my husband asking him what he wants for dinner, call him to confirm our after supper plans, and then make a mental list of the groceries that I need when I go to the store. After that I wash the dishes in the sink, put the dishwasher on and finally, I come back downstairs to resume my writing.*

*15 minutes until the play date ends.*

*This is the hurdy gurdy. These are the daily actions and thoughts that flow through my mind that have no place following me into the domain that I do energy healing from. With a mind so distracted, I cannot concentrate. And without this focus and attention, I cannot connect to the energy. That is why I need to stop.*



Figure 4: Michelle Flowers. 2013. *Stopping*. [Ink on paper].

*When I stop, I breathe ... and I set my mind a new direction to move in, one that has a narrowed focus where the daily noise can be left behind.*

*I close my eyes and drop my hands into my lap, my relaxed fingers slightly curled and resting one on top of the other. I relax my shoulders and take a deep breath that is almost a sigh after the busy afternoon. I hear the voices of children upstairs and I find myself hoping that they don't interrupt.*

*I sit for a moment and freeze everything in my mind and hold a space of emptiness. My mind is quiet and detached where no extraneous reflections or mental conversations occur; no check lists or accidental contemplations arise that wander off on their own. This silence is the stopping. It might only last a moment or it may take a few breaths to corral my thinking mind, but it is enough to alter the trajectory of my thoughts and to set off in a new direction, away from words, into a world of images and energy.*

*As I sit in this space now, I get interrupted by wayward thoughts that break through and try to weave their way into the stillness.*

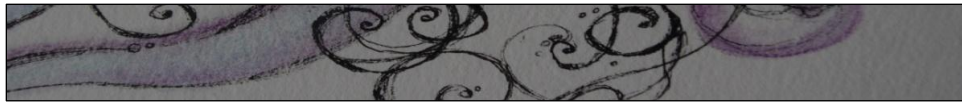
*"How long until the play date is over? Is the washing machine cycle finished? I can't remember if the dryer is empty?"*

*I watch them race into my mind and I pull myself back, reminding myself not to catch onto their tails or follow them onto the next distracting contemplation.*

*I stop, detach and breathe. For a moment there is stillness and all I hear is the in and out flow of my perpetually moving breath. From this place, I can now move forward and take up the concentration and awareness that I need for my task at hand, be it writing or energy work, painting or recovering from a busy day.*

*I enjoy the simplicity of my inhalation and the relaxation that now spreads throughout my body...*

*... And then the doorbell rings...*



After writing this piece on stopping, I realize that I understand this theme better than I did before. The act of writing has become a pivotal tool in my research process that not only captures what I know and remember, but also allows me to access my own deeper introspection. Just as ground-breaking feminist scholar Laurel Richardson (2001) described in her article “Getting personal, writing stories,” she wrote so she could know. When I find the right words to explain what I have unearthed, the description that I portray clarifies my thoughts and cements them in my mind. Now I recognize the nuances that accompany the act of stopping and I have seen the learning and self-discovery that can be found in the process of capturing a story. At the beginning of this project, I thought I would be describing a phenomenon that I knew intimately. Little did I know that I would be learning more than I thought possible. Every time that I write, I go a little deeper and I grasp a little more.

After writing my own story I find that I am eager to go back to the conversations I had with Joyce. Now that I have witnessed this potential for self-discovery through the intersection between interview and reflective writing, I want to learn more.



## **Grounding**

*As I take another sip of my tea, I relax into the familiar. Sitting in Joyce’s kitchen talking about energy healing is something that I have often done. The only difference is that today I am careful not to let our discussion meander too far away from the topic at hand. I reign in the tangents my mind might gallop off in and I focus on the next element that I want to ask about. Joyce identified the action of grounding as one of the initial steps in her healing process, so I lead our chat in this direction.*

*“Tell me what you do when you ground yourself,” I ask.*



*“When I ground myself, I am firmly rooted right here and right now; I don’t want to be anywhere else. It is like I am literally attaching myself to the earth,” Joyce explains.*

*“It’s almost like a ‘heaviness’ but that’s not quite the right word. It’s a sense of connection that makes me feel that if someone tried to pick me up, they wouldn’t be able to. Inside I feel warm, solid and calm. It’s like everything that is within me, drains right out and it is taken care of,” she says.*

*As she talks, I hear Joyce search for the right words to capture how she experiences grounding. It makes me smile to myself.*

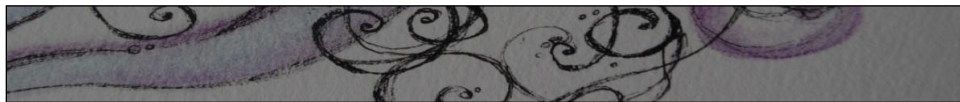
*“I’m glad I’m not the only one who struggles to give this phenomenon words,” I think.*

*I also notice how Joyce’s description of grounding is different from my own. While she thinks of herself as immovable, I always imagine tree roots growing from my feet; probably because that is what I was taught the first time that I felt energy all of those years ago.*

*While most of the elements in my own energy healing method are based on the training that I did with Joyce, I also include pieces from other courses I have taken. I know that I often include acupuncture points and the breathing that I learnt in my yoga studies but this isn’t always the case. I intuit what I need to do in the moment when I am doing the healing work. That means the method that I use is different every time. No wonder energy healing attracts the consternation and confusion that it does in academic research (Kiefer, Pitluk & Klunk, 2009; Levin & Mead, 2008; Mills & Jain, 2010; Rindfleisch, 2010). I think about how impossible it must be to make definitive conclusions about the efficacy of energy healing when there is such variance between the techniques of individual healers and the different needs of the individuals they are working with.*

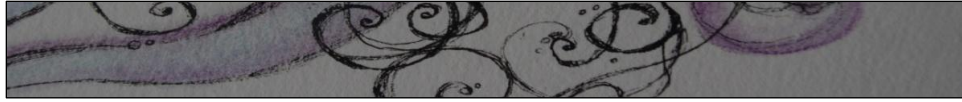
*I bring my attention back to Joyce as she continues to describe her healing process.*

*“When I feel grounded, that is when I set the intent for what it is that I want to be doing in the session,” Joyce describes, leading me onto the next step in her method: setting a healing intention.*



Later, when I am home thinking about the subtle differences in Joyce’s technique compared to mine, I am glad that I chose to talk to other healers in this exploration. Already, after just a few questions, I have seen things in a new light and I have been led to contemplate elements in a way I might not have considered on my own.

As I did before, I wonder what else I will find when I take a closer look at grounding and capture my thoughts through the writing process.



*As I sit back down at my computer with my freshly brewed tea, I settle into my chair and I place both feet flat on the ground. Before I begin writing, I want to bring my attention to the task at hand and connect to a mindset that is intent and focused. When my mind is quiet, I join my energy to the earth to draw on her<sup>18</sup> support. I imagine all of the tension and distractions that lie knotted between my brows flowing out of my body, through my feet and into the ground beneath me. After I exhale, I take a deep in-breath and I draw in the supportive, calming energies of the earth. It has only been a moment but already I feel more alert and present than I was before I began.*

*When I consider my own healing process and reflect on the elements that make up that procedure, the act of grounding is an independent and separate act that I consciously attend to and carry out deliberately each time that I do this work. It is intimately connected to my first action of stopping, but it takes this connection to the present moment further, cementing my energy to the earth and settling my mind for what I am about to do.*

*When I ground myself, I send my awareness to the soles of my feet and I gather my thoughts into what I think of as a questing, connecting action. I imagine energy from my feet growing down into the ground in undulating waves, like perfect tree roots joining me to the earth. The act itself is a practice that refers to focusing the individual's energies and is often done by connecting them to the earth with an aim of feeling balanced (Gordon, 2006). As I feel this connection to the ground through my planted feet, I am aware of the real and instant effect it has on me on many different levels.*

*Physically, it is immediately calming as my typically constrained and habitual breathing becomes deeper and more purposeful, slowing my heart and bringing my attention back to my body. Mentally I feel clearer and more focused as the jumbled spinning thoughts that often reside in my mind quiet down, relieved by the task that has them imagining deep and grounded roots. And emotionally, I notice the obvious difference when I compare the calm still result to the untethered, easily excitable state that I so often inhabit.*

*The act of grounding links my thoughts and intentions to this moment in time, countering my human failings and runaway mind and opening access to my greater potential. When I am grounded I feel that I am ready to begin whatever task is at hand from a place of quiet calmness and focused thought.*

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<sup>18</sup> I refer to the Earth using a feminine pronoun because my personal perspective holds that she is the mother of all living things.



Figure 5: Michelle Flowers. 2013.*Grounding*. [Graphite, ink and watercolour].





## Intention

Taking my lead from the natural flow in the conversation I have with Joyce, the next element of energy healing that I focus my attention on is the act of setting a healing intention. It is another separate step that I always carry out in my individual healing process; something I was taught in my Quantum Touch training course. I have always thought about this act as another way to focus my aim and concentration. When I set these goals, I imagine them spreading out like a glowing net that covers the entire healing session, influencing it all and subtly guiding the outcome.

As I think about the three elements I have focused on so far (stopping, grounding and setting an intention) I realize that although the rest of my healing method is different every time I do a treatment, these three steps are always there. I wonder what would be different if I left any of them out.

I go back to the conversation I had with Joyce to see what else I can learn.



*The kitchen table where Joyce and I are sitting also acts as her office and I glance towards the other end where her laptop lies by the window. I imagine her sitting there between clients, occupying herself with the reading she does on wholistic health and other esoteric topics. I also see the bamboo plant resting near the wall and I recognize it from the different treatment rooms and clinic spaces she has worked in since I have known her. As I pick up my cup of tea and sip at the warm liquid, I move forward with my next question.*

*“OK, tell me more about setting intentions,” I ask as I cradle the warm cup in my hands.*

*“Energy work is fundamentally about shifting things, and hopefully for the better,” Joyce laughs. “And that becomes the intention. For example, if someone comes in with shoulder pain, then I set the intent that the energy is going to go there and correct whatever the issue is.”*

*I nod at this familiar notion and urge her to go on.*

*“You have to realize that without intention and awareness of the flowing energy, then what you are doing isn’t energy work,” she explains.*

*That last comment catches me off guard. I quickly reflect on my own practice and my habit of setting my healing intention at the beginning of a treatment because that was one of the steps I learnt in my training. For me it is part of my process, important – yes but wow! Here Joyce just pointed out that along with awareness, intention is a fundamental component of this phenomenon. I never considered how important this element was to an energy healing treatment. I immediately realize that I haven’t given much thought to the deeper nuances of this step in my process and I know that I need to explore it further.*

*“Running the energy is easy peasy,” Joyce continues laughing. “Everyone can do it. Whether everyone can feel it or not, well, that is a different case. I’ve taught people energy healing in the past and they have said that they can’t feel anything and they often think that they are just sitting there with their hands resting on a person. I have to remind them that the key is your intent,” she says as she emphasizes her point. “If you intend for the energy to go there, then it is going to go there. Cause it just does! Energy follows thought ... because thought is energy too,” she finishes as she laughs again.*

*Joyce’s light heartedness brings levity to our conversation and prevents me from being swallowed up in deep introspection. She has always taught me with a feeling of joy that reminds me of her approach to healing and life, as well as her important lesson that in everything that you do, you need to be happy.*

*Before she goes on, however, Joyce adds an important caveat to the role of intention.*

*“There is one thing you have to remember though. After you set your intentions, you must release your attachment to the outcome. Although you intend for the shoulder to get better, you cannot expect that it will happen. This is where the individual receiving the healing energy comes into play. Deep down, they might not want to heal or get better,” Joyce says.*

*I nod as I remember my own experiences of doing energy work and the times when the results were not as I had hoped. It is a point that I often have to remind myself of: that I cannot be attached to the outcome. When I am working with another individual, it is not my healing journey. In the midst of the light hearted conversation I am having with my teacher, I keep finding solemn moments where her words catch me and ring out like a bell chiming in my head.*

*As I contemplate these thoughts, I also begin to think about other energy healing modalities that are different to the method that Joyce and I use. I wonder whether setting an intention is as important to these other healers. I had already planned to talk to my friend and teacher Sam<sup>19</sup> because of her depth of knowledge but also because of our different healing practices. I make a mental note to specifically get her perspective on intention when we meet.*



*It is a bright Saturday morning with deep azure skies that promise the kind of afternoon that is filled with contented sighs and excuses to spend time outdoors. As I walk into Sam’s sun filled living room, I drop my bag in its usual spot by her front door. I met her a few years ago when a mutual friend introduced us and we became instant friends, bonding over our shared interest in energy healing and alternate health paradigms. As I look around her home, I admire the thriving plants, artwork and books that fill this loving living space and I settle back into the deep comfortable couch that has been the host of many cups of tea and wild traversing conversations. From the kitchen in the next room, I hear Sam calling out to me and I answer without hesitation.*

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<sup>19</sup> Sam is the pseudonym that my teacher chose to use in this project.

*“Of course, I’d love a cup of tea,” I smile to myself, imagining that she already knew the answer. Sam is trained in a different healing modality than me and has been an instructor in this practice for well over 20 years. Over the relatively short time that I have known her, she has become one of my most respected teachers and without fail, whenever we talk, I am always captivated by her depth of knowledge and the sense of peace that I feel when I am around her. I’ve come to visit her today and talk to her about energy healing so that I can get her perspective on this phenomenon and see what details about her healing work are both similar and different from my own.*

*When Sam brings in the tea, she settles down in a chair opposite me and nods that she is ready. As I sip from the large mug, I start with the same question that I asked Joyce and I sit back, expectant and eager for the direction our discussion will go.*

*“My first question is: what do you do when you do energy work?” I ask throwing the discussion wide open for whatever answers might arise.*

*“Mmm,” she says as she pauses momentarily as if deciding what direction to let her answer follow.*

*“When I think about the term energy work, well ... if everything has life force in it, then everything we do is really energy work. It is really just a matter of how identified you feel with the energetic aspects of what you do. So if everything is energy in motion or energy in stillness, then it is all the same, really. All movement of energy has the potential to be healing. With regards to what I specifically do, I tend to focus on a body, mind, heart and spirit perspective,” Sam explains and I settle back into the couch and sip on my hot tea.*

*As I hear Sam use the word life force instead of energy, I smile. Already the subtle differences are appearing.*

*Sam continues to describe her healing practice to me in a voice that, just like Joyce, is direct and assured: “The way that I do my work ... is mostly by listening. And listening with my ears, but also trying to listen with all of my senses ... with my awareness. So I’m trying to notice not just the cognitive understanding of the words that you have said but the way that you say it. If there is a sigh, what’s the tone, how is the person sitting or standing or what kind of gestures they make while they describe their experience. And sometimes there are no words and it is what I’m feeling that is coming off that person that I pay attention to.”*

*I nod and lean forward placing my mug down on the coffee table between us so that my hot tea can cool down a little. I begin thinking about my own energy healing experiences and the treatments I have given and I remember to ask Sam about an element that came up in the conversation I had with Joyce.*

*“So, I have a question about intention because it is one of the first steps in my own healing practice. Do you set intentions in the work that you do?” I ask.*

*“Yes,” she answers. “My intention would be – and it is almost an automatic default now because I don’t have to think about it consciously all the time – what would be healing for this person in this moment?”*

*As Sam describes her healing process, I see immediately how different it is to mine. As I discovered when I talked to Joyce, I still undertake this step as an independent component of my process. For Sam, it occurs automatically, without conscious thought.*

*“I also set intentions when I begin an initial intake interview and when I get input from the person that I am working with during our session. I say in my heart and with my intention that the person before me knows what they need. My intention to support the healing of the person I am working with is a large part of my process,” Sam explains.*

*As I listen to Sam’s answer I am so engrossed in her response that I never get back to asking her about the themes of stopping and grounding that I talked to Joyce about. Instead, my attention is caught by a reference to how integral and important intention is in Sam’s healing work.*

*As we continue to talk, I think about the implications of Sam’s words and I become totally engrossed in the description of her process. I realize I have completely tuned out the world around me when people walk past the front of the house and their voices suddenly burst through the open windows.*



When I contemplated the discussions that I had with my teachers I found my own personal understanding of the role of intention was missing some of the depth that my mentors clearly embraced. This inspired me to delve deeper into my own understanding of this element. To do this, I returned to my journal and the illumination that I was discovering through my writing process. In setting pen to paper, I discovered that beyond the setting of an overarching healing objective at the beginning of a healing session, there is another nuance of this theme that lies embedded throughout my entire healing practice.



Journal entry: 10 June 2013

In the energy healing modalities that I have learnt, setting an intention is usually a separate step that is performed at the beginning of a treatment, laying the groundwork for what is to come. But as I sit here and explore my healing process with specific attention focused on the act of intention, I find it weaving its way through the entire energy healing process. The intention that I set not only guides the flow of energy from the beginning of a treatment, it flows with that energy throughout the healing session, influencing where it goes and what is achieved, hand in hand, collaborating with the life force.

When I read some of the academic research on this topic, I found the following quote that resonates with what I have learnt from my teachers.

When one declares intentionality toward an object or action, whatever resistance may be within tends to mobilize and dissipate, allowing manifestation of intention to be realized. Intentions do not refer to having a goal-directed outcome in mind, nor a specific purpose for directing another person or situation. Rather, it is cooperating with the field, the emerging order, instead of trying to change it. (Watson, 2002, p.14)

This quote captures what Joyce said about setting an intention and then releasing your attachment to it. Intention is about working *with* the energy and the needs of the other person.

When I consider intention and what it is that makes it different from a normal thought, I am instantly aware that it is heart; in order to engage and drive the direction of the healing energy that is around me, I need to *feel* what it is that I want it to do. My mind is not enough.

To look at this action, I reach out and feel the energy now, directing it to flow through my hands, giving it a purpose and instruction for what I would have it do. I witness the subtle element that distinguishes this directive from just any other thought. To communicate my intention and will to the energy around me, I must think through my heart in feelings rather than words. I notice how these driving emotions are more encompassing than a linear thought could ever be, arriving instantly without the need for translation and holding so much more potential within their arms. When I try to communicate my intention in language, the limiting parameters that words provide stumble and fall short in comparison.

This is what drives the healing energy in my work, not only at the beginning of an energy healing treatment, but throughout each moment that I am connected to the universal life force that is around me. It is intention and the way that I communicate my instructions is through my heart. I remember the conversation I had with Sam and I realize she said the same thing. She sets her intentions in her heart.





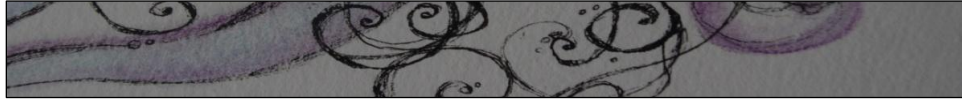
Figure 6: Michelle Flowers, 2013. *Intention*. [Ink on paper].



After writing in my journal, I am a little taken aback at my new discovery regarding the importance of intention within energy healing work. Now that I have explored this element, I realize that before talking to my teachers, the way that I knew this act was detached. I was given the knowledge in my energy healing training and I performed the step without really understanding the full ramifications and importance of this element. The difference now is that in my careful introspection, I have felt the weaving tendrils of intention and I have witnessed the role my heart plays in this step. This comprehension that I now feel comes with a shift in my

inner perspective; before I knew about intention because it was taught to me and now it is something that I have seen and experienced for myself. This knowing is deeper and more profound.

I go back to my conversations with my teachers and think about the caveat that Joyce mentioned; the importance of the individual's own healing agenda. I see that the role that the client plays in their own healing is more important than many people receiving treatments realize.



### **Self as healer**

*I thank Joyce for the mug of hot tea she passes me, my second since I arrived. My eyes scan the kitchen area while I wait for our conversation to resume. I love to see Joyce's workspace with her spices and condiments ready at hand – the tools of her other love: cooking. The whole room feels content and happy and is filled with the sense that this is a cherished and much used space. As Joyce sits back down with her own fresh brew we take up our conversation and the roles that both the healer and client play during a treatment.*

*"The thing is, with energy healing, yes: we are sending energy to the person but we aren't fixing them. We aren't healing them. Remember what I said about intention? You have to release your attachment to it because the individual has their own healing agenda and this is paramount. It affects everything – it is more important than anything you as a healer could do. The bottom line is that you have to heal yourself," Joyce stresses and I think about the body's natural ability to heal. We don't have to consciously think about a cut or scrape getting better; our cells take care of everything. Yet other injuries and ailments might last our whole lives.*

*"What is the difference? What stops our bodies from fixing these things as well?" I ponder before Joyce brings me back to our conversation with her continuing explanation.*

*"All the healer is doing is raising the vibration of the energy in that area of the body so that the person can heal themselves. It is like you are setting up the optimal environment that allows that to happen," Joyce explains.*

*I nod as I blow on the hot cup of tea cradled in my hands. I remember the energy treatments that I gave my sister before she died; when her pain didn't abate and it looked like I had done absolutely nothing. Although at the time, self-doubt rammed its way in, filling my head and heart with uncertainty and hesitation, now I hold this memory up and look at it from this other perspective. I cannot control what the energy does or where it goes; the person I am working with is responsible for their own well being. Angelique was on her own journey, one that I bore witness to but one that I could not carry out for her. I sigh as I realize how reassuring it is to be reminded of this from Joyce.*



*As the early morning sun gets higher in the sky and subtly shifts into her mid-morning attire, the light in Sam's living room changes and the room brightens further. The noise from people walking down the street picks up as the warm temperatures lure more and more people outside. As I continue talking to Sam, our conversation follows a similar route to the one I had with Joyce. We talk about the role that the individual plays in their own healing. Sam explains how this perspective influences her healing sessions.*

*"I am not the expert on you, you are," she says unequivocally. "My questions when I see someone in my practice are: 'Why have you come today? What is healing for you? What can I do to support you and help you in this part of your journey?' I see my healing work as a partnership and that any healing that does occur isn't because of me. It is their healing. They did it and anything that I offered them is potentially part of what supported them in that healing," she explains.*

*As soon as Sam says these words, they remind me of something I have just seen in my search of the academic literature on energy healing.*

*"I just read those very same sentiments in a journal article about energy healing," I tell her. "In this one study<sup>20</sup>, the researchers interviewed 19 different healers and the healer/client relationship was described as a collaborative process 180 separate times."*

*"It is true. The work that I do is really about empowering the person that I am with for them to know what they know and to find the answers that are already inside them. They just need to connect, find them and be ready to listen to them," Sam explains.*

*"When healing comes from the person seeking the treatment, it is more effective and true. It becomes more about trusting and knowing that we all have the ultimate answers inside of us rather than the energy healer trying to control and direct the process," Sam describes.*

*When Sam explains that we have the answers inside of us, I think about a realization that I recently had that taught me this very same thing.*



*As I sit in the doctor's office I find myself feeling slightly petulant as I begrudge the time away from my thesis, yet at the same time, I hope that the visit will answer some questions I have about my health. I have been having chest pains and dizzy spells of late, and of course, there is the small matter of continual and overriding exhaustion. I feel that there is something wrong, and in a way, I hope that my blood work will reveal a vitamin deficiency or a hormone imbalance. Nothing too serious: just a small easily fixed problem that I can pin all of these*

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<sup>20</sup> See: Warber et al., 2004.



*symptoms onto. It seems ridiculous, but I don't want to be told that I am healthy and that everything looks normal. That will mean it is all back on me – and that is one more responsibility I just can't carry.*

*Every facet of my life at the moment appears to hold some degree of pressure and as each element places its own unique burden upon my bent and crooked back, it appears as if my knees have crumpled to the ground, preventing me from standing. Quite simply, I can no longer cope. The responsibilities of motherhood, the final throes of graduate school, and the weight of thick and immobilizing family issues have caught around my legs, pulling me down to the ground whilst stabbing my heart with continuous bouts of unnerving pain. Of course I am stressed, I know that without a doubt, but the real problem is what to do about it? I am losing myself to the vortex of my own inner thoughts and the internal dialogue that continually pulls me under, rendering me helpless. How the hell am I supposed to escape my inner voice and the pattern of worry that has become my natural defense? I know it is undoing me and that I am drowning in my habit of over-analyzing everything but my desperate need to think my way out of these symptoms is the only way that I know how to react. This is why I am hoping for something else to be wrong – something else to blame that will be an easier fix than attempting to reprogram the entire way my mind functions.*

*While I have been turning to alternate medicine, energy treatments and homeopathic remedies to help me through the overwhelming issues that are piling on top of me every day, these treatments feel like small branches keeping me afloat on a dam that is threatening to burst. As the flood waters keep on rising, the healing that I am receiving struggles to keep up. Perhaps if I could get a treatment every day, I might find the panacea that I need but that isn't going to happen. I can't find the time to go for a walk around the block, let alone get myself out for a daily appointment. There are just too many things vying for my attention. I also wonder why I am not treating myself and doing energy work on my exasperated heart and flailing head. Of course, as soon as I ask myself that question the simple response that arrives in a dejected and exhausted tone is that I have already given all my energy to everything and everyone else around me, now, there is nothing left for me. I am spent.*

*What I need is help, a boost to that first step forward where I might be able to make the time to help myself. It seems so easy when I look in from the outside but believe me, every suggestion that I am given seems like another thing for me to do, another drain on my limited resources and I just don't have it in me to take any of them on board. The blood work is going to ascertain whether there were any hidden health issues I don't know about, to rule out others, and to help identify which homeopathic remedies might help, and while I hope it will carry all of the answers, it has still taken me over two weeks to drag myself to the clinic. As I wait for the results to come back, I keep hoping that my little vile of blood will solve all my problems and explain my symptoms – anything that doesn't point the finger back at me.*

*As I wait in the doctor's room, I flick through the glossy magazine that has been strategically placed to distract me and help pass the time. I barely notice the pictures let alone focus on the words or the articles within it. I am feeling impatient; a get-me-out-of-here kind of feeling hangs in the air as I listen for the sound of my doctor's voice in the hallway. A student doctor comes into the room first; her friendly demeanour provides a striking contrast to the feelings of frustration that are washing over me. Nobody told me I would have to see a student first and to be honest I have absolutely no desire to talk to her at all. I don't want to repeat my*

*story or go over my symptoms, and I don't want to be a teaching aid as she rehearses her bedside manner. I feel sorry for her as I try to keep my annoyance in check, sure that I am about to become that difficult patient, impossible to help and exasperating to deal with.*

*Sometime early in the summary of my situation as I try to provide my health history as succinctly as possible, I tell the student doctor unequivocally that I don't want to be informed that everything is fine and that my problem must be stress. I am being brutally honest, my terse manner cutting straight to the chase. A diagnosis of stress does nothing for me – I already know I am stressed. What I want to know is what I can do about it because everything I am trying isn't helping. I watch the student doctor take a deep breath and then diligently turn to her computer screen, a committed look coming over her face as she sets forth to find the answers. Most of my blood work looks fine, one number was lower than normal but I guess it doesn't have any bearing on my symptoms because it never gets mentioned. I make a mental note of the indicator though, sure that it might still mean something to my homeopath. When my doctor finally comes into the room after the student's initial work-up, we exchange small banters and then he gets down to business.*

*"Everything looks fine," he says and so I counter with what I had not wanted to hear.*

*"So all of this is due to stress?"*

*I nearly laugh out loud when he confirms that the pressures of my life are playing havoc with my internal physiology. As I blink back the tears, I try to hide my disappointment and overwhelming disorientation as I wonder what I am supposed to try next. As I sit listening to innocuous suggestions about medication, walks around the block and bike rides with the kids, all I can hear is a growing list of things I need to do, a list of activities I have to try and suggestions for medication I will never take. I walk out of his office on automatic pilot, feeling utterly miserable and totally disconnected. The more I replay the suggestions of things to do, the more I feel my tension and anger rise. As my heart clenches again, pain digging into my chest reminding me I am supposed to remain calm, out of the blue, I ask myself a simple question.*

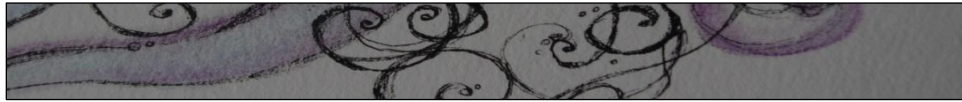
*"Ok, well.... what do I want to do?"*

*This small change in perspective initiates an immediate physical response. Instead of being told what to do, I realize I am giving myself permission to explore what it is that I actually want to do. I feel the iron like grip on my heart and lungs release and I take in a deep and restorative breath. It feels like the first full inhalation I have been able to take in months. With this one thought, the immediate pressure that was suffocating me backs right off.*

*"I want to have a long bath.... with the door locked," I think to myself.*

*Although this moment of calm doesn't last and my usual pattern of anxious thoughts bully their way back into my mind over the next few days, the memory of that relief remains. Over the next week as I stumble back into the hole that cocoons me when I am feeling depressed, I ask myself again and again, what do I want to do? With this one question I find that I am able to insert a small disruption into my usual internal dialogue. What I find is that every time that I do that and ask myself what I want, I feel better. By putting a light back onto my own needs, I realize that I am giving power to my own voice. Instead of placing requirements and demands*

*onto my overly taxed system, I let my worn out body tell me what it needs. And of course, what any mother of three young children needs, my answer is time to myself.*



*As I sit down at my computer this morning, I contemplate this change in perspective and why it holds the power and weight that it does. It is clear that an external directive with instructions and suggestions, no matter how helpful, was more than I could take on. But an inquiry into my own desires turns the focus onto me, a shift in attention that is no longer a burden but the presentation of an opportunity. When I give myself permission to choose to go for a walk, to take a bath or to sit and draw, it is the autonomy and respect for my own self-knowing that makes the difference. The binding obligations that are pulling me in different directions are no longer relevant when I consider what it is that I want to do and as I listen, I find answers that speak directly to what it is that I actually need.*

*The funny thing is that you cannot be told something like this: you need to experience it for yourself. It is like the proverbial light bulb going off in my mind, “Aha, I get it now”, and now that I have taken a step back and looked at this realization, I can see the message all around me. With this inward view of myself I recognize a simple truth just waiting to be noticed. I am my own healer and I know what it is that I need to make myself feel better. When I start down that path and listen to my own counsel, I begin the journey to better health.*

*As I go on with my writing, part of me wonders why it took me so long to realize this personal truth. In response, the idea of timing appears before me, bubbling up from my subconscious as a possible answer. This theme came up in my conversations with my teachers so I think back to these discussions to see what Joyce said about this notion.*



## **Timing**

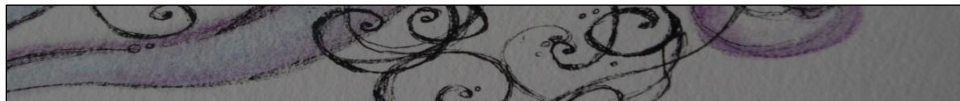
*Joyce sees me swallow the last of my tea and asks if I would like another. As I consider it for a moment, I decide that two is enough. I want to keep my conversation with her flowing and pretty soon the call of my full bladder is going to interrupt. Joyce has been reflecting on elements of her healing practice and the importance of respecting each individual’s own personal healing journey, so I urge her to continue.*

*“You have to remember that everyone is on their own path and they are going to get to where they are going in their own time, and that might not be on the same day that they see me,” she says.*

*“The unfortunate part about this is that some people don’t understand that healing is a process. When they don’t see results right now, some people give up. It is a process within them that they need to travel through and there is nothing that I can do to speed that up. In the end it comes down to them making a choice to be healthy or not,” Joyce explains.*

*This comment makes me reflect on how the element of timing is intimately related to the self as healer. As someone looking in from the outside, the energy healer has no idea whether an individual is ready to move on with their healing. I know from my own experiences there can be a lot of pain and anguish that comes with healing and this cannot be rushed. In the story that I just recalled about the chest pains and anxiety, I had to be ready to see the role I was playing in creating my own stress and until I could recognize that and I was prepared for the consequences of owning that perspective, I was not going to feel better. No matter what homeopathic remedies I took or energy treatments I received.*

*I wonder what Sam will say about this element of the energy healing process.*



*As my conversation with Sam moves on, I find myself taking moments to look at the artwork on her living room walls. Although I have spent a lot of time in this room, I find that there is always something new that catches my eye and draws me in to its visual form. I love that about this room; there is always something interesting to look at that draws me in. Sam and I have started talking about the timing of the client’s healing process and the respect that Sam has for this element of her work. Just like my conversation with Joyce, this topic evolves after we talk about the importance of the individual being integral to their own healing.*

*“When someone comes to see me and they are angry and outraged over a hurt that they have experienced, I ask what I can do for them,” Sam explains.*

*“While it is tempting to want them to release the pain and anger and to move on to forgiveness so that they can get on with their healing, I realize through my own experiences that it sometimes takes time to move onto that point. Sometimes people just want to rant and rave and be heard ... so I hold the space for that,” she says.*

*“Ahh, to be heard,” I think to myself as I recognize that idea from my own life and the number of times it has appeared in my thesis.*

*“For me, as the healer, I realize that suffering is their path for now, the way that I suffered and stumbled along my own way and when I was ready to move on, I had to realize that myself and say, ‘I want that now. I want it but it is hard and I need help because it is difficult to forgive.’ And now, what I feel about healing, is that so much of it is about timing,” Sam states.*

*“Mmmm. I can see a lot of the elements that you mentioned are reflected in the journey I have been undertaking to write my thesis,” I say. “I had to be ready to recognize these stories and to be able to share them and I needed to know what it was that I wanted to say.”*

*As I speak, my mind is reflecting on the similarities I am finding in the conversations with my teachers and elements I am discovering within my research. They overlap on so many levels.*

*“This whole process has caused huge turmoil in my life but at the same time, I am really getting to know myself and the story that wants to be told. And with this new awareness I keep coming face-to-face with a wave of grief that is waiting to pour out. But I had to be ready for it,” I continue.*

*Sam nods with empathy and explains:*

*“One of my teachers taught me that you don’t go after what is buried or hidden,” she explains. “You wait patiently for it to appear. And even when you see the smallest piece coming into the light: like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, you need to resist the desire to help. If you were to touch that butterfly to help it emerge from its cocoon before it was fully ready, you would damage it and may even kill it. The healer must be patient and work with the timing of the individual, when they are ready to heal.”*



When I think about these words that Sam spoke, they ripple through me with the recognition of a great truth. As a balm for my impatient nature, I have often soothed myself with the mantra that everything happens for a reason in its own time. It usually helps to placate me if I can remember to recall the lesson. Then I cajole my restless thoughts back to the quietness that comes with surrender. Of course, there are probably more moments in my life when I have fought and raged and clawed and chewed, fighting the stubborn fight, forgetting these words and the lesson about timing. I remind myself now that I need patience to recognize the timing of my life’s healing journey. Just like the stories that appear in this thesis, I had to be ready to find them within myself and I had to be ready to let them out.

In thinking about the years that it has taken to reach this point, I have come to the unmistakable conclusion that I could not have written this thesis until I was ready. I needed to find my voice and to push through the barriers of self-censorship that I myself had created in order to tell my stories. If this process had not taken the time that it did, my own fear and silencing subconscious beliefs may have meant that I had no stories to tell.

From the perspective of the energy healer, the theme of timing refers to a profound respect for the individual and their own personal healing journey.

As I consider the intimate journey that this thesis has been, I wonder what other personal lessons lie hidden within the conversations that I had with my teachers. As I think back to my talk with Joyce, I remember another theme that appeared unexpectedly while we spoke but one that has huge implications for my research especially within the academy.



## Limiting subconscious beliefs

*As I shift my weight in my chair and try to ignore the fullness of my bladder, I urge Joyce to continue. I am way too interested in this conversation to interrupt it. There seems to be a cocoon of creative energy that has been growing around us this morning, leading our discussion in the perfect direction, ensuring that I have the inspiration that I need to complete my thesis. At the moment, we are still talking about the role that the individual plays in their own healing.*

*“The thing is, with energy work, you don’t have to believe in it for it to work. For it to work, you have to really want to get better.” Joyce’s voice is confident and assured. “That’s the bottom line – if you really truly deep down inside, don’t want to get better, then you are not going to. So whether you believe in this modality or not, it doesn’t matter.”*

*As I hear Joyce’s comments, I realize how important her statement is. The modality doesn’t matter – healing lies in the hands of the individual.*

*“Energy healing is just another tool. It is like acupuncture or massage or chiro or whatever. It is just another way to heal. It has nothing to do with belief. The real question a person needs to ask themselves is: do I want to be healed?” Joyce says.*

*“Ahh,” I say. “So, it goes back to the idea that the individual is their own healer – the modality is just a way to help the person get what they need,” I reiterate, as the notion settles into my awareness. “That is why a treatment will or won’t work on someone – not because they believe in it at all or whether energy healing is real or imagined, it is about their desire to heal,” I say. “The onus falls squarely back on the individual.”*

*“Right,” Joyce confirms. Her voice is matter of fact and I recognize the decades of experience shining through in her voice. I feel that Joyce knows this in her bones. I on the other hand, am just now coming to really understand this.*

*“So, what does it look like when someone doesn’t want to get better?” I ask. “Because you would think anyone walking in the door to see you actually does want to be healthy.”*

*“Well, we all have this part of our brain called the subconscious and I might say, ‘Yeah, I want to get better’ but in the back of my brain my inner dialogue is saying, ‘But if I get better, then my husband isn’t going to help me anymore and who is going to do all of this housework for me? When he cooks and cleans for me, I like that attention. I like it when people ask how I am feeling. It shows me that they love me and care about me.’” Joyce explains.*

*“So, people get attached to those ideas that play out in the back of their heads but these are thoughts that they are rarely aware of. I think if you are looking for this attention outside of yourself, what you are really looking for is love.” Joyce’s voice is filled with empathy and I imagine that she has seen this play out in her treatment room over and over again.*

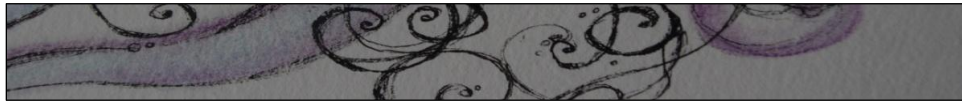
*“So, love is the currency and all of those things – getting someone to cook and clean for you, that is how you interpret that you are receiving love?” I ask.*



*“Right and the thought is, ‘If I get better, then I’m not going to get all of this love.’ Of course, that thought is faulty but because we aren’t aware of it, it keeps playing out in our subconscious, affecting our lives until we find it and correct that way of thinking,” Joyce explains.*

*My thoughts turn to academic research and all of the studies that have been done on different energy healing modalities to ascertain their efficacy. When this perspective is taken into account, the whole research paradigm is faulty – you cannot judge whether or not the healing therapy is effective based on the healing outcome experienced by the patient because the individual’s desire to heal can never be assumed. Even if you ask someone if they want to get better, they themselves may not be aware that deep down, they want to stay sick. This theme in our conversation opens a doorway for me into the power of the subconscious and our limiting beliefs. When I focus on them, I see how our individual perceptions really do create our individual realities.*

*As I think about my own subconscious beliefs, the story I want to tell leaps immediately into my mind.*



When I consider this idea of limiting subconscious beliefs within my life and how they have laid buried, altering my actions and thoughts without my awareness, I immediately think about my artwork. I have always doodled and drawn and shown some proclivity towards artistic endeavours but for most of my life, I never considered myself an artist. I carried a sketch book with me when I back-packed across Canada and the UK and I studied art throughout high school right up until my final year and yet, I always thought my art was something that I did for fun. I never viewed it as part of my identity and I always shook my head and denied the title of artist when someone else suggested it.

“Of course I’m not an artist – my work isn’t that good,” I would think to myself.

For years I told myself that my doubt and self-limiting thoughts were an honest appraisal of my skill. I thought that I was of less than average skill and that art was just a hobby for me. Real artists produced work that was beautiful and appeared effortless and this was not how I saw myself at all. This belief was comfortable – it didn’t require putting myself out there or exposing myself to the judgment of others. I kept my sketch books to myself and continued to consider art as something that I did for enjoyment – just for me. No matter what my friends told me or how much they reassured me regarding my abilities, I just didn’t believe them. And after scratching the surface of that belief, I discovered just where that thought pattern came from.

*It is the end of one of my year ten art classes and everyone is scattered around the room, cleaning up and washing brushes, chatting and inspecting each other’s work from the last hour. Our teacher wanders around the room, glancing through her glasses that lie balanced on the end of her nose, examining the paintings we have been labouring over today. As I return from the*

*sink with wet brushes in hand, I see her standing by my work so I walk up slowly, unsure of why she has stopped by my painting.*

*“Is this yours Michelle?” she asks me as she bends forward over the table, adjusting her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose so she can get a better look.*

*I tell her yes as I look down to try and see what it is that she is focusing on amidst the kaleidoscope of drying paint.*

*“Well done,” she compliments me, “I like it a lot.”*

*I’m taken aback for moment, shocked by the praise that I really had not been expecting. “Thank you,” I shyly whisper, as my cheeks flush pink and I reconsider my own work with fresh appraising eyes. I hadn’t mentally assessed it or thought about it as a piece deserving of praise; it was just a painting I did to fulfil the requirements of the lesson.*

*After her inspection, Mrs. Grady<sup>21</sup> straightens up, and raises her voice to be heard over the talking class.*

*“If everyone would give me your attention for a moment,” she says, pausing to wait for the requested silence.*

*“If you would like to come and see what Michelle has done here with her use of colour and her interesting brush strokes ... it is very well done,” she explains, as she moves away from the table, making room for the students who are now gathering in closer to see what she was referring to. As I step back out of the way myself, I duck my head down and stare at my painting trying to avoid eye contact with my peers. I feel my cheeks burning red this time as the heat of my embarrassment rises behind my collar. I have that uncomfortable ‘everyone is staring at me’ kind of feeling and all I can think of is the prickle in my cheeks and how hot and confining my heavy cotton school uniform has become.*

*As everyone moves away from my desk and resumes their cleanup activities, I start to cool down and feel grateful that the attention is over. As I pick up my wet painting and walk over to the drying rack on the other side of the room, I glance up and see my friend Sandra<sup>22</sup> walking straight towards me, her eyes taking in the painting in my arms.*

*“It really isn’t that good you know,” she says as she approaches me ... and without skipping a beat, I agree with her whole heartedly.*

*“Oh, I know! I don’t know why she liked it,” I say as I look at my painting with sudden contempt and disdain. I adopt Sandra’s criticism as my own without a second thought. As I watch her walk away with a smirk on her face, I feel deflated and crushed.*

*“Why doesn’t she like me?” I ask myself as I deposit my painting on the drying rack, no longer careful to protect its damp form. I don’t even consider why she didn’t like my artwork. I have already discarded it as irrelevant and unimpressive.*

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<sup>21</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>22</sup> A pseudonym.



*When I walk back to my desk, head hung low, I replay the last few minutes over in my mind, wondering what I could have done differently to protect myself from that attack.*

*“I knew it was no good. I shouldn’t have let myself be proud of my art. Sandra hates me now because she thought I was showing off,” I think to myself.*

*I hang my head low as I leave class that day, absolutely unaware of how disabling this thought pattern will continue to be for the next few decades of my life.*



The speed with which I processed these thoughts and accepted them for truths stuns me to this day as I recall that afternoon from nearly 30 years ago. The clear repeating belief that I took on that afternoon has echoed over the years whenever I have considered my artistic abilities. I have often deflected compliments, feeling they were undeserved or down-played my artistic ability with what I honestly believed was a fair appraisal of my skill. I thought my talent was mediocre and that it was important to be humble, so I hid my art in sketch books and rarely took them out. While I thought I was being forthright and sincere, I was actually betraying myself again and again, all because I wanted so desperately to belong. I imagine I can hear my inner voice from that afternoon all of those years ago:

“I’ll agree with you no matter what, just as long as you like me.”

As my subconscious offers up the dark secrets that crafted my younger self, I see myself anew. I also see the implications that this limiting belief has had upon my life. With a gentle hand I hold up the belief that lay buried within that memory and I see it for what it is.

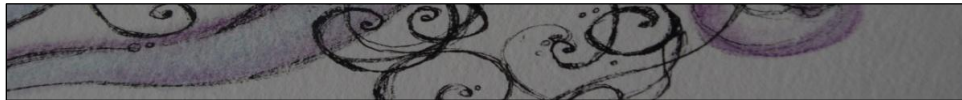
“If you can see me, you might not like me. If I am visible: I am vulnerable.”

In capturing this story, my writing process has also allowed me to look back on my experience and view it with a new perspective. Instead of the 15 year old girl that was desperate to be liked and to belong, I can now view that afternoon with the vantage the years have given me. In writing this story, I am able to recognize other examples of similar limiting subconscious beliefs that I have held in my life.

One of these restrictive and disabling beliefs that I unintentionally embraced created a conviction that appears often in this thesis. I believed that talking about my alternate health ontology ensured my vulnerability and that only silence guaranteed my safety. To avoid being different, I kept my differences hidden and when challenged or exposed, I chose not to defend myself. As I look back with this new perspective, I see a lifetime where I have hidden my real feelings and I haven’t spoken up. I thought that to be included and liked, I couldn’t be myself. It is a strange but powerful thing to see myself with fresh eyes; something that is liberating and enlightening yet unsettling at the same time. This fresh insight shakes up my whole identity and makes me question; “Who am I really?”

As I recognize these realizations and understand them from a place of new self-awareness, I have the opportunity to correct these thought patterns. As I begin to type my next sentence, I laugh at the irony. My writing and my artwork, the creative ventures that I have typically kept hidden, have been the vehicles that have actually allowed me to see the fault in these beliefs. Instead of hiding myself from myself and others, I now see that I am and always have been a writer, an artist and an energy healer. The difference is that now I believe it.

This idea of self-awareness sends me back to my conversations with Joyce and Sam to see what they said about this theme and how it relates to energy healing.



### **Self-awareness: the ‘aha’ moment**

*As my conversation with Joyce continues, she goes to her kitchen and brings back a pitcher of water and two glasses. She keeps talking as she gathers what she needs, not letting the momentum of our discussion fall to the wayside. As I sip at the cool water, I listen as she continues chatting about the role an individual plays in their own healing.*

*“We all have our baggage and issues that we have trouble working through but sometimes people will have this ‘aha’ moment during an energy treatment,” Joyce says “and when they do – well, you can tell because of the way the energy feels. It is like a damn has burst and the person lights up. It is very cool ... it’s like magic,” she describes.*

*As Joyce explains the way that these experiences feel to her, she beams with a giant smile and laughs at the memory of them. In hearing her description, I feel the energy between the two of us lift a little, as if her recollection has invited some of this same magic here into the room with us. I think about what an amazing gift it must be to witness this kind of healing taking place.*

*“Healing is so much more important and profound when it is done by the client themselves,” she adds and as soon as she says it, I recognize the truth in her comment.*



Being a novice healer, I have only experienced moments like the ones Joyce described as part of my own healing journey. For me, they feel like I have had a shift in my internal understanding and finally I can see myself authentically. In particular, I think about the recent realizations that I experienced regarding my identity as an artist and how my own self-silencing had created the barriers that had kept me from connecting with my authentic self. This moment of self-awareness caught me off guard and literally stopped me in my tracks as I realized what I had not been aware of before; it was as if part of me had woken up. Because I was able to bring these old subconscious beliefs and thought patterns into the light, I was able to understand that these harmful notions no longer served any purpose and I could release them as no longer being

relevant. It doesn't surprise me that Joyce experiences the energy of these moments like a dam bursting; for me it was as if an old wall had finally been washed away.

When I talked to Sam and she too described 'aha moments' and how inspirational these experiences are in her healing practice, I couldn't help but comprehend the importance of this theme in an individual's healing journey.



*As I reach towards the coffee table and pick up my tea I realize it has gone cold in the bottom of my mug. Sam sees me put the cup down without sipping from it and asks if I would like another.*

*"Sure," I reply and I follow her into the kitchen as she puts the kettle back on. I help myself to a fresh tea bag from the canister by the window and while we wait for the kettle to boil, we chat about Sam's bountiful vegetable garden that is growing just outside. I can tell that her squash plant is doing very well as its wayward vines have reached through the fence, leaving the veggie patch behind and brazenly taking up residence on her back lawn. With our hot drinks topped up, we both make our way back into the living room. As I settle back onto the couch, I gather my thoughts back to the questions I had wanted to ask during this conversation and I decide to change direction. After learning more about her technique and her daily practice, now I want to ask Sam a set of inspiring questions; questions that need to be answered from the heart. I place my mug of hot tea on the table in front of me so it can cool a little and I ask my next question:*

*"So, what inspires you about your work?"*

*"Wow, ok, ... there is a flood of thoughts that come to mind all at once but if I was going to put them all together in a nutshell, it would be seeing people take their suffering and be there with them as it transforms into healing," Sam says.*

*As Sam recalls memories from her healing work and describes their effect on her, I cannot help but feel inspired and uplifted as well. There is an energy in her voice that stirs something in me and I realize that this is the feeling that I want in my research.*

*"When people have that moment of self-recognition; the 'aha' when they see something and become aware of something that they didn't know the moment before ... and yet at the same time, they know that they knew all along but had just lost touch with it ... this is the most inspiring part of my work. Ultimately the person is seeing themselves and who they are. That is what keeps me going as a healer – the joy of seeing that," she describes.*

*As Sam talks, I instantly recognize the notion of the 'aha' moment: Joyce used the exact same term.*

*As Sam describes these experiences, it feels like she is reliving moments that she has witnessed in her clinic. There is something in her voice and the way that her face is beaming that*

*I recognize from talking to Joyce. I imagine that some of the power and magic of those instances has joined us here in the room as the energy between the two of us tingles.*

*My brief reflection on these electric sensations is interrupted as Sam continues her description, "It doesn't happen every day or every week or even every month, but when it does happen to that degree, there is bliss in that moment."*

*"When I think about the deepest healing I've received from any type of healing," she continues, "it is an insight into myself. I've seen into myself, truly and authentically and then from that insight I have a choice to live from that place or close the door and go: 'I don't want to know that about me.' These healing moments have been powerful because there has been an internal shift," she says.*

*When Sam admits that she too has had these massive internal shifts, I feel more supported in my own self-discovery. When I had captured my story about my year ten art class I was shocked at how I had taken on someone else's opinions so easily. A part of me wondered at how I was able to deceive myself so completely. Hearing that one of my respected teachers has also experienced these profound moments of self-awareness helps me see that I am not alone in experiencing these faulty beliefs. Sam is absolutely right: when an individual experiences self-awareness and sees themselves authentically, the healing is profound. I know that because I have lived it.*



*After listening to Sam talk about the deep personal healing that she has experienced from being self-aware, I follow that lead and ask her about it.*

*"What would be one of your most powerful healing experiences?" I ask, leaning back into the deep cushions of the couch as I cross my ankles and get comfortable, waiting for Sam's reply.*

*"Ok," she says as her gaze gets soft and she thinks about an appropriate story to share. It doesn't take long however, when she nods and looks back at me, ready to begin.*

*"This would be my story about one of the most powerful experiences I have had with healing and with receiving energy work in different ways," she says and it dawns on me how privileged I am to hear a personal story from Sam's own healing journey. I thought she might answer with something she had witnessed in her practice.*

*"I was at that point in my life where I was really struggling with the idea of whether I would have children or not have children," Sam begins. "Since I was a little girl I would buy baby clothes and you know, tuck them away and say 'When I have a baby ...' 'When I have a baby...' It was just sort of a no brainer: I was going to."*

*As Sam begins her tale, I realize these are details about my teacher that I didn't know. I am absolutely still as I listen carefully, respecting the intimate nature of the story that she has chosen to share with me.*

*"And then, as I entered my 30's and my clock was ticking, I found myself with a partner who didn't want children so it was more up to me and how much I wanted this," Sam describes.*

*"And so, I had all of these baby clothes and I'm in my early 30's and I'm in this relationship that it is quite serious and it was at that point of deciding, ok, so if he really doesn't want children and I do, then we need to decide, do we go our own way here?" she says.*

*"You were at a crux," I offer, my mind struggling to grasp how difficult a decision this would have been. I reflect on my own family and the unspoken expectation that I would always have children. The enormity of Sam's decision is something I can barely imagine.*

*"Yeah a turning point. And it was so, so, hard and the question of having children was bringing up a lot of physical symptoms. While I struggled to solve the problem I was working with a number of different energy workers. There was chiro, myofascial, reiki, pure energy etcetera, and it just kept being a big stirred up thing. It wasn't sorting itself out," Sam describes and as I listen, I can feel the tension and the indecision that was pulling at her coming through in her voice.*

*"So when I talked to one of my teachers about it, she said, 'Sam this is your decision. It is your choice and you are trying to make it consciously. If you could take away all the voices about what you should and shouldn't do, and you just went inside and imagined having a child, do that and see what happens to your breath. And then, imagine not having a child and see how the breath responds in your body. Find a quiet time in your life and do that and then you will know,'" Sam recalls and I find I am nearly sighing with relief at the poignant advice.*

*"So I was driving home after talking to her and I thought; I am going to try this right now," she says and she laughs at the display of her impatience. "So I do, and of course, the breath that brought me the most peace and the most calm and tears of relief, was not having a child." As Sam describes the feelings and answers that came with this breath work, her voice is deeply calm as if that profound inner realization was still resonating through her and she was utterly at peace with it.*

*"And I realized I had chosen a partner that didn't want children: I had chosen this. But at the same time I knew that my family and my sisters would be just heartbroken. I could imagine all of their reactions because they were just waiting for me to have my babies. And I knew that I was going to disappoint them and part of me did not want to speak the truth. And I thought, oh my gosh, I know what I really want: I just couldn't come to terms with it," Sam describes.*

*"So after I had that realization with my breath, when I realised my truth; that I didn't want to have children in this life time, I sat with it for a few weeks letting the decision and awareness come into my being. Anyway, I was driving home very late one night from a friend's place just outside of the city. As I drove along a deserted grid road, all of a sudden a deer came out from the bushes and I hit her on the hind leg. I was stunned and in shock and I started screaming. I was just horrified. But the deer kept going and hobbled across the road ... and then*

*a few seconds later a baby deer popped along behind her,” Sam describes and I feel heartbroken right along with her as she tells the story of the mother and her baby deer.*

*“And I just sat there in the car sobbing in tears; I was in total shock. I couldn’t do anything – I couldn’t even drive home, so I called my partner and told him what had happened. It didn’t take him long to drive out to me and I said ‘We have to find the deer. She is injured, we can’t leave her like this.’ So we tried looking for her in the ditch along the road but she was nowhere to be seen, she was gone. It was pitch black in the middle of the night and we couldn’t see a thing, so we had to go home and I was just heartbroken. I knew she was suffering and was in pain but we couldn’t find her,” Sam describes.*

*I imagine myself in the same situation and I feel the same horror that Sam is describing, my stomach tensed up in a ball now as I listen to her story.*

*“So we wake up the next morning and I am in pain with this mother deer and the baby losing its mother. I end up going into work but I really can’t concentrate and I ask my therapist if she has an opening – which she does – so, I have an energy healing treatment. And for the whole appointment I just lay there on the table while she was working on me. She knew a little bit about me hitting the deer but not a lot because I wasn’t ready to speak about it yet; I was still too upset. So, as I lay curled over on my left side on her table and she was sending me energy, suddenly I went ....” and Sam demonstrates a great explosive sigh that has her fling herself back in her chair and throw her arms out wide. The noise and movement startle me for a second and I imagine the scene in the quiet treatment room that morning.*

*“My therapist asks me straight away, ‘What was that?’ and I just started to sob and sob and sob,” Sam continues. “It was just this huge release and I told myself: ‘Either way, if I was to become a mother, I would sacrifice something. Part of my life would change to become a mother. And if I wasn’t a mother, I would also sacrifice. Either way I choose. Have a baby, not have a baby. Either way would involve sacrifice. I get it. I get it.’ And then I said, ‘That is why the deer sacrificed herself and injured herself because she gave herself to me to show me. Either way, you are going to make a sacrifice.’ And then I knew I wasn’t going to have children,” Sam describes.*

*“So, the realization settled into every cell,” I say, mesmerized by the connection between the deer and Sam during this huge healing crisis in her life.*

*“Yes, I got it, I understood. I knew that all of the women in the world that have decided to have children have made sacrifices but they have received joys that I would sacrifice, like giving birth and holding my own child in my arms. And at the same time, I would have other joys that these women that had children might not get to experience fully, like being able to travel and devoting my life to my healing work. So this realization was about joy and sacrifice. I realized that my decision wasn’t about one or the other,” Sam laughs in relief. “They go together,” she says.*

*I take a deep breath at that moment realizing how much tension I had been holding in my stomach as I listened to that story and I think about the huge insight that Sam had.*

*“After that, I go along through the rest of my day and when I come home that evening, my partner tells me about his day. It was around mid morning when he drove back out to the grid road with his bow and arrow to track down the deer. When he found her laying in a little wood*



grove off to the side of the road he saw that she was breathing but it was heavy and laboured and he knew that she was seriously injured. So, at just after 11 a.m. he released the bow and he made one shot and she died.” As Sam completes her story, I immediately make the connection.

“That was when you were on the table getting the energy work?” I ask, astounded and wide eyed as I begin to understand what happened to Sam that morning.

“Yes, that was when I was on the table and I went...,” and once again, Sam demonstrates the explosive sigh that released the powerful insight that she had. “It was at the same time. I saw the clock. So, that would probably be one of the most powerful healing experiences that I have had,” she concludes.

I’m stunned for a moment by the sheer power of the story. I find the personal insight that Sam received extremely inspirational and I wonder at the power of our breath to show us such personal truths. And then there was the gift of the mother deer’s life that coincided exactly with Sam’s huge explosive sigh. This part of the story simultaneously amazes me and reminds me how interconnected every living thing in the universe is.

“Wow. Thank you for sharing that with me,” I say to Sam as I realize how important this tale of personal healing is to her.

It feels like I need to get up and move after I hear that story; to let it sink in and fill my bones, so while Sam gets up to go to the bathroom, I go into the kitchen for a drink of water. The inner knowing that Sam came face to face with in this story makes me think of other ways that I know in my healing work. As I fill my glass with water from the kitchen tap, I stare back out at the vegetable garden and remember the conversation I had with Joyce.



## **Intuition**

As I sit back down after going to the bathroom, the call of my bladder finally being too much for me, the bamboo plant that is growing nearby catches my attention. The morning sunshine is streaming through the window and is lighting up its intense, vibrant green leaves. I know that Joyce has run energy into this plant over the years I have known her and I smile to myself as I appreciate how healthy it is looking.

Joyce and I have been talking about self-awareness and how that contributes to the work of an energy healer. This leads us to a discussion on intuition and other ways that we know in our healing work: a topic we have talked about many times over the years. In a way, I feel like we are taking up where these past conversations have left off. From these previous talks I know that Joyce feels energy, just as I do. I also know that sometimes she sees images in her mind’s eye and on occasion she has also smelt things or single words have rung out in her mind when she is giving an energy healing treatment. She has told me that she considers all of these things to be part of her intuitive knowing, providing information that will help her in that particular

*moment with the individual she is working with. Today I ask her how she knows these things are coming from her intuition and not from her imagination.*

*“When I am doing energy work, sometimes images appear in my mind and the way that I can tell if they are intuitive hits or not, is that I focus on the image itself. If I have to build it in my mind and try really hard to see it, or if I find that I am reaching for it - then I know that it is the ego mind that has constructed it,” Joyce explains.*

*“So, when it takes an effort to build that image that is your clue?” I clarify.*

*“Yeah and when that happens, that isn’t the same as intuition. When I access universal consciousness, which is where I understand all knowledge to reside, my intuition conveys the information that I need in pictures that are right there in my mind, and these images are really strong. I don’t have to think about them or build the elements within it. My imagination is not part of it,” Joyce says.*

*“So, you really need to have a fine-tuned self-awareness to acknowledge where the image is coming from?” I ask.*

*“That’s right. I also find that the colours in these intuitive images are bright and vibrant when I compare them to something I might imagine on my own. And that picture is ‘boom’ – right there instantly before me and along with it is the information that I receive. That sense of knowing is something that I feel throughout my whole body,” Joyce explains.*

*“And when I have that sense of knowing, I feel this solid feeling that is grounded right through me somehow,” she continues. “It is as if there is a connection beyond me to something else that lies beneath it. And then there is this feeling that bubbles through that knowing – a feeling of joy that lights me up.”*

*As Joyce describes the way she experiences intuition, I see the look on her face change as if she is remembering all of the different physical sensations that come with this inner way of knowing. As she recalls them, I feel her whole countenance brighten right before me as if she was sparkling from the inside.*

*“This is how I know it is my intuition and not something that I have just imagined,” she describes. “I know to look for all of these feelings together.”*

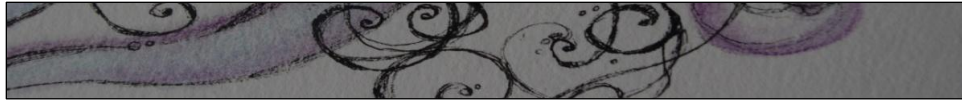
*As Joyce talks, I think about the information that arrives when I do energy healing work. Sometimes images appear in my mind and they portray information about the energy that I am working with. When Joyce tells me that one of her personal clues that verifies that these images come from her intuition is the brightness and vibrancy of the picture in her mind’s eye, I try to recall if that is also true for me. As I think about it, I honestly cannot say there is a difference between these images and pictures that arise in my own imagination. Perhaps my work as an artist has already filled my mind’s eye with the convincing colours and hues of the natural world around me.*

*I think about Joyce’s description of the sudden arrival of these clues however, and I add that lesson to the list of things I want to observe next time that I am doing energy work. I haven’t*



*noticed this element before and I want to see if this sign helps me distinguish between my intuition and my imagination.*

*Later when I am thinking more about how I experience this other way of knowing, I turn to my journal to capture the elements that are an inherent part of my practice.*



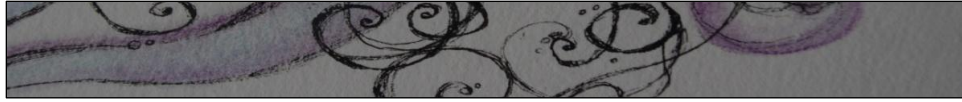
Journal entry: 17 July, 2013.

There are steps in my energy healing practice that I use when I am trying to determine whether I am connected to my own intuition. Although I do see images in my mind's eye, more commonly, I sense life force in a tactile way. When I describe these physical sensations, I allow the descriptions of how this energy feels to float to my tongue as I sit back and wait for them to appear. This pause where I apply a fine and delicate self-awareness, acts to examine the source of this incoming information. I have to ask myself, "Did that description come from me or did it arrive from my client?" This process cannot be hurried or assumed and I find that I must continually be aware and checking in to see if I am driving the description of what I feel or whether that information comes with the energy itself.

It takes focus and concentration ... and of course, self-awareness. It is a very humble feeling to push my impatient nature to the background and to sit waiting for the information and direction to arrive. I admit that I often get overtaken by the excitement and electric feeling that I get when I work with healing energy and it takes a great effort to peel myself back and to reconnect with that silence. To differentiate between what I have imagined with my own ego or fallible mind and what I have surrendered to is a subtle distinction that takes practice and patience and an honest self-awareness to recognize.



After reflecting on the way I experience intuition, I think about other healers and the different ways that they experience this way of knowing. I have read that some healers see energy and others hear messages when they work. I have always thought that seeing energy with my eyes open would be amazing, although, perhaps a little distracting. My thoughts turn to Sam and how she described this part of her healing work.



*As we get close to the end of our conversation, I realize the bright early morning light that was streaming into the living room when I arrived is now a soft warm early afternoon tone. It softens the details in the room and makes everything glow with the relaxed feeling of good company and warm pleasant weather. As Sam is talking, she pauses and turns her head to the side as if she is listening to something.*

*"I am just asking for guidance to see if there is anything else that I need to add or talk about. OK... the last little bit I need to mention is hand gestures that I use in a healing session," Sam says.*

*I nod as I recognize the hand movements that she is talking about. I also find myself feeling very fortunate that our conversation is being influenced by Sam's higher guides.*

*"During a healing session, I often find my hands moving without me being aware what my fingers are doing," Sam says. "I realized that I was getting a message through my fingers, from, well, up there somewhere," she describes as she gestures to the space above her head.*

*I know immediately what she is referring to: the impression that the information is coming from beyond you but you have no idea where that source is or where it is coming from. But there is a solid knowing to it none-the-less.*

*"I also get messages through a stillness or I might hear a sound or a voice. And sometimes I get a tickertape where words appear as headlines running through my mind. And sometimes I feel that the information is coming in through what I call the world channel and I pay attention to things like trucks driving by or birds tapping on the window. Sometimes I notice a smell or a certain colour that stands out. When that information appears, I will ask my client 'what does that mean to you?' and that will open up a whole association," Sam explains.*

*As Sam describes the way she receives her intuitive information, I am a little in awe of her sensitivity. I know that the years that she has been doing this work have helped hone a natural ability that she has always had. I cannot imagine what it is like to sense information the way that she does.*

*"When I start to use these gestures and move my hands during a session, I tell the people that I am working with that it is like a kind of sign language but it is one that is gestural. It is a way for me to sort out the information that I am receiving more quickly than I could using my logical brain. When my hands start to move then I know I am supposed to put aside my logical questions and go another way. It is like a divining rod or being open to being guided. I find that this process allows me to get to some important information that we might not have found if we had taken the other route," Sam says and again I find myself marvelling at her ability to receive this information.*

*"So these ways of knowing, would you describe them as your intuition?" I ask.*

*"It is interesting that you ask that. When I have used the word intuition in my clinic with people who are very science based or very rational, they get very uncomfortable. I often get responses like: 'I would be more comfortable if you didn't use the word intuition and you use the term professional judgement.' And I would say, 'OK, I see your point of view,'" Sam says.*

*"It is like they are asking you to speak in their language," I reply.*

*"Yes, and I see that in a way this information is my professional judgement but I feel that this term isn't right. There is a tightness around it and it feels very left brained and it doesn't have room to breathe. So I say, 'If you don't like the word intuition, how do you feel if I say: my sense of that is....?' and they are more comfortable with that," Sam says.*

*"Because they place intuition into that hokey category," I observe.*

*"Yes, that word has taken on an iffy quackery quality to it. But if I use the words: 'I'm sensing this', or 'I'm sensing that this might be helpful for you', then it is really interesting. That helps my more rationally minded people go, 'well, oh... yeah, I have a sense of things. That's ok. I'm ok with that.'" Sam says.*

*"Because that term isn't charged with that negative cultural meaning," I reflect.*

*As Sam talks about the loaded response to the word intuition, I recognize the vulnerability that comes with practicing an alternate healing modality that isn't always accepted by the general public. However, I also hear in Sam's words that this vulnerability doesn't affect her like it does me. She navigates around it in her practice. Even though her clients have come to see her and they return because of her skill and ability, some of them still feel doubt or discomfort around the intuitive and sensed elements of her work.*

*As I reflect on the social stigma regarding energy healing, I think about one of the stories that Joyce told me.*



## **Social Stigma**

*"So tell me a story about an energy healing treatment that you have given that has had amazing results, perhaps something that you weren't expecting," I ask Joyce, and I sit back in my chair, a slight feeling of excitement hovering between us as I anticipate the story about to be told. I love hearing about the mysterious.*

*"Well, ok," she says as she takes a moment to think about which story she will tell.*

*"The biggest wow that I ever got was working with a lady that had colon cancer. She had two tumours in her body, one was at the front of her abdomen and one was lower in the back. There were just the two. Anyhow, she had come in to see me looking for massage treatments because of her lower back pain. I had already seen her a couple of times for massage and in that*

*time, she had not once mentioned that she had cancer. It wasn't on the case history form so I had no clue this woman already had a history of it or that it had reoccurred," Joyce begins her tale and my thoughts instantly go to my sister who died of colon cancer. I imagine the pain this woman was in and I curse the insidious time bomb that these tumours represent.*

*"Anyhow, we are into the second or third massage session and this woman tells me she was having a hard time with her bowel movements. And of course, something twigged in my mind because my stepmom had just gone through this a year before. And I asked if she has gone to see her doctor about this because I am thinking, 'My God, she has a tumour in her colon somewhere.' Then she tells me,*

*'Well, no I haven't, but do you think I should?'*

*'Yes, I think you should!'*

*'Well, I just finished a round of chemo eight months ago and I got the all clear, so....'*

*And I was just incredulous," Joyce says and I wonder too about the total dependency that some people place on the biomedical system and how they ignore the signs and symptoms that come from their own body.*

*Then Joyce continues her story, "I said, 'WHAT? What are you talking about?'*

*'Ohhh, ok well, I had colon cancer but they got rid of it and I'm in remission.'*

*Well, then I said, 'I'm sorry, if you have had this before, you should get in to see your doctor straight away.'*

*So, she did. By the time she was back to see me a week later, she had seen her family doctor on the Monday, the oncologist on the Tuesday and on Wednesday she was in having an MRI before her appointment with me. She already had the results when I saw her and yes, the cancer was back.*

*'I actually have two tumours,' she tells me. 'One in the front and one is lower down in the back. That explains why I have been feeling so bloated and haven't been able to poop,' she says and then she asks, 'Do you think I can have an energy treatment today?'*

*'Absolutely,' I tell her. 'So, what do you want me to address?'*

*'Well, get rid of it!' she answers.*

*And I'm like, 'Oh great, no pressure, right?'*

*As we laugh about it I say 'Well, no harm in trying.'*

*So I set the intent that this is what we are going to do; we are going to get rid of the colon cancer. And when I looked at her I thought, wow, there is so much going on, where do I start?*

*'Ok,' I thought, 'I will just start with the abdomen and see where it takes me,' "*

*As Joyce continues with her story I feel the enormity of this request and I remember giving my sister energy treatments when she had her cancer diagnosis. I felt so useless as if I was up against something I had no hope of moving and I'm impressed with Joyce's attitude.*

*"So, I started as close to the tumour as possible with one hand on the top of her abdomen and one underneath, and I begin running energy. We are just chatting away and every so often, I check to make sure the energy is still running. The whole time her body is just soaking it up and I literally feel the energy being sucked out of my hands. So, we are just talking ... blah blah blah... and all of a sudden, something goes poof and her bloated abdomen flattens out and my hand moves and sinks into her body. I just looked at her and my eyes were big and she is looking back at me and her eyes are even bigger and she asks,*

*'What was that?'*

*And I say, 'I don't know, you tell me.'*

*'Well, the bloated feeling is gone. I feel so much lighter... Oh my god, do you think it's gone?'*

*I say, 'I don't know, it could be,' and I just keep running the energy because her time isn't up. Anyway, after the treatment she walked out of there like she was a whole new person.*

*The neat thing was that she was scheduled for surgery the next morning and she had just had the MRI done so they knew where the tumours were. So when she left, I told her,*

*'Just let me know what the doctors find.'"*

*As I listen to Joyce's story my eyes are wide and I think about how amazing it would be if the surgeons found nothing.*

*"Anyhow, I didn't see this woman for six weeks. She went through the surgery and the chemo... and then she called me one day and said,*

*'Joyce, can you come to my house and give me an energy treatment. I'm really low on energy and I need to get off these drugs,' so I went over to see her. When I get over there, I ask,*

*'So, what did the doctors find?'*

*And she said, 'Joyce, you aren't going to frickin believe this,' so I go,*

*'Hit me, I want to know.'*

*So, she tells me how the surgeons saw the placement of the tumours from the MRI: the one on the front was easy to get to, so they got rid of that. But the one at the back was so far down and was amidst all of the lymph nodes and nerves, they weren't sure if they could operate on that one. They were afraid that she might come out of surgery paralyzed from the legs down or could lose the function of some of her organs. Anyway, that particular tumour – the one at the back had deflated, literally! The doctor said that it had shrunk and shifted up and because it had moved they were able to get to it without any problems.*

*When she told me that, her story literally gave me goose bumps. And I thought,*

*‘Holy crap, this really works!’” says Joyce as she laughs at her own doubt.*

*As I hear this story, I realize I’m leaning forward from the suspense and the fact that here, right before me was a story where energy had made such an enormous difference to someone’s health. Then I think,*

*“Hang on, Joyce has doubts too?” I never would have thought that after all the years she has been doing this work, that she would have any doubt at all. It makes me feel so much better considering my own self-doubt when I do treatments.*

*“And I know the energy works, but when you see something like that...,” she trails off.*

*“Anyway, the doctor asked my client, ‘What did you do?’ and she didn’t tell him. I asked her, ‘Why didn’t you? This could have been a great breakthrough for energy healing,’ and she said she didn’t want to tell him. She felt vulnerable and she didn’t want to look like she was...”*

*“Doing hokey stuff,” I finish for her.*

*“Yeah, like a flake. The thing is this woman is very left brained and analytical. She is a financial services type person who works with numbers and calculations – all very orderly and linear. She never held back and always said what was on her mind. And yet, when she was put in that position, she could not tell her doctor that she had an energy treatment and this is what happened.”*

*Just like the story with Sam, the thread of doubt and the social stigma regarding the ‘hokeyness’ of energy healing have found their way into Joyce’s practice. I’m left quiet for a moment as I take in the enormity of Joyce’s story. Not only does the energy healer feel vulnerability and doubt, so does the client. Regardless of the incredible healing that this client experienced, identifying herself as someone that used energy healing made this woman feel so vulnerable that she could not tell her doctor about it.*

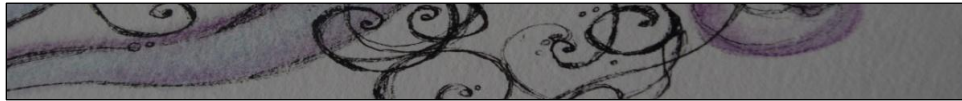
*As I sit with this story a little longer, I also see the mirror to this statement: that is that the medical establishment holds alternate medicine in such low regard that patients are afraid to tell their physicians that they receive treatments of this type, regardless of how successful the outcome is. I wonder at it all; it seems so confusing and complicated. Isn’t the focus of both healing paradigms supposed to be about the health of the individual and not issues of power? As I reflect on the vulnerability that Joyce’s patient felt, I feel empathy for her position. I know the silencing that she experienced very well. I have been intimately aware of it throughout this entire writing process.*



As I contemplated the themes that appeared in my conversations with my teachers, I focused on elements that struck me with their importance and personal relevance. I found that although I often recognized these features from my own energy healing practice, my understanding lacked the depth that my teachers clearly embraced. Throughout the deeper



introspection that this observation inspired I discovered an overarching element appearing throughout this project. This final element – that of awareness – is one that appeared early on in my conversations with both Joyce and Sam and is one that they both recognized as being integral to their own healing work. As I looked closer at this particular element, not only did I find it influencing all of the other elements of energy healing that I had investigated, it became the tool that had been guiding my insights and considerations all along.



## Awareness

*It is hot in the house – the kind of stifling warmth that makes me keep all the lights off as I lie sprawled on the couch, trying not to touch myself with my own limbs. The kids are playing downstairs where it is cooler and I’m watching TV with my husband, waiting for bedtime to roll around so I can send the little people off to bed. The fan is on, pointed directly at us in a gratuitous display of wanton self-interest. We also have fans in the windows and open doors, trying to cycle in the cooler evening air and bring the temperature in the house down. The noise of all of these fans and the kids playing downstairs means the volume on the TV is up higher than normal. With the air in the room pressing up against me, being overly familiar and goading me into a simmering sense of irritation; I want to get up and move but I don’t. The inertia of the heat keeps me still as I wait it out, knowing that it will cool down eventually. I don’t know if my lethargy is an act of patience or surrender but I am already looking forward to bedtime when everything will be still.*

*In the midst of our mindless entertainment my eldest son runs up the stairs, calling to me before he has even reached the top.*

*“Mum, Jack<sup>23</sup> just spilled water on your computer,” he says.*

*Holy crap.*

*I’m downstairs before I know I’m moving, hoping I’ll find a pool of water making its way to my laptop – a slow moving puddle that is spreading but reassuringly hasn’t reached its destination.*

*I don’t find that at all.*

*What I see is water on top of my computer pooling on the black plastic, looking like a tiny pond of mercury with its crisply defined edge and distinct shape. It seems like it is sitting there teasing me as it balances on the cover, ready at any moment to spill over the edge and seep into the hardware sitting below.*

*“A towel, a towel. Someone get me a towel,” I yell as my entire family crowds around me surveying the mess.*

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<sup>23</sup> A pseudonym.



*As I snatch at the cables and plugs that are still attached to my laptop, I pull them out roughly in a desperate attempt to isolate this little piece of machinery that essentially houses the last 12 months of my life. I wipe the water off with my hand, pushing it away in a rapid swiping motion, holding onto the small hope that this small amount of liquid is all that fell onto my work. I pick the laptop up and hold it close to my chest and then my eyes go wide as I see the table underneath and I take in the deluge and flooded debris.*

*The lacquered brown surface of the table shimmers back at me, taunting me with the extent of the spreading liquid that covers most of its cluttered top. Notes that I have on my desk are dissolving before my eyes as the paper soaks up the water, thirstily drawing it in regardless of its own demise. As I look around at the damage and push text books away from the destructive moisture, my bare foot lands on a cold wet patch of carpet. When I step back I see the long dark area on the floor below that tells me the glass of water that went flying everywhere must have been full. I imagine the deluge flowing over the edge of the table like a waterfall, soaking into the carpet until it was saturated through to the underlay. The puddle is close to wires and extension cords and part of me begins to imagine what would have happened if the water had poured onto all of that flowing electricity. I shiver at the thought and quickly kick the pile of wires aside.*

*As someone passes me a towel, I throw it on the table and wipe the surface dry, putting the laptop back down in front of me and turning my attention to its care. As I wipe the cover and open the screen to assess the damage, my stomach is balled into a tight fist as I yell at my kids with rage and fear, my mind trying to grasp the possibility that my computer might be destroyed.*

*"I can't write it again, I haven't backed it up since the school holidays started. Oh my God, what if I've lost two months worth of work?" I yell.*

*I feel like throwing things and running away as my mind struggles to comprehend the possible fact that my thesis might be gone. All of the editing I have done to my first draft is on my computer, a painful process that I have dragged myself through, something that I am not sure I have the willpower to do again.*

*As I grasp the possibility of rewriting my thesis once more, I go silent with panic at the sight of the inside of the screen. There is water all over the keyboard and monitor and my hope that the damage was an isolated puddle sitting on top of the lid is quickly replaced with terror and fear. I wipe at it with rough, jerky movements, trying to mop up the water with the bath towel hoping I stop any further damage. I need to find out right this moment if all of my writing is lost. I am desperate as I move without thinking and I reach out to turn the computer on. I need to know immediately if it is still going to work.*

*Before I can push the on button all the way down, my husband yells at me, pulling my hand away while slamming the screen back down in an attempt to shut the whole thing off.*

*"What are you doing? Don't turn it on. You have to let it dry out or you will short circuit everything," he says.*

*"Oh," I say bewildered, realizing he is right. "I didn't know you weren't supposed to do that ..." I say, my thoughts trailing off as it hits me that there is nothing I can do but wait.*

*We take the battery out of the laptop and more carefully now, I wipe down any trace of liquid that I see as I feel my emotional self shut down. The initial fear and screaming rage that I let loose on my kids has been released and now, I am quiet and withdrawn as I sit in a state of slow simmering tension. There is nothing I can do until I let it dry out. My husband says I should leave it for 24 hours ... so I resolve myself to wait.*

*As I let go of the drama that the spilt water created, I sit back down on the couch and I force myself to detach from the stress and the worry. I tell myself that there is no point being stressed because there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. It helps a little. As the TV show continues to play I no longer give my full attention to the plotline as I text my friend and tell her what has happened. She gives me the name of her computer technician who saved her laptop last year after it underwent a similar fate. She assures me that he is wonderful and that he can retrieve anything so I shouldn't worry. My husband agrees and reminds me that forensic technicians can retrieve information from computers that have been blown up.*

*"Just wait until tomorrow to see if it dries out," he says.*

*As the night continues on and the kids are eventually sent to bed, the temperature in the house cools down enough to finally turn off the fan. As we adjust the volume of the TV and the barraging assault of heat and noise finally dissipate, I slowly find myself calming down and removing myself from the stress of this evening's events. With the promise that the computer technician will be able to retrieve my thesis no matter the state of my computer, I really have nothing to worry about ... so, I take a step back and see things from my alternate health perspective.*

*My thoughts go straight away to a lesson that comes with spilt water, or leaks and dripping taps – anything where liquid overflows. From my perspective as an energy healer, these things are a sign of unexpressed grief and unshed tears.*



From my alternate health perspective, unexpressed grief often comes with water being spilt in our physical world as emotions that get bottled up overflow into other areas of our lives. I've seen a window start leaking in the middle of winter while the world outside was frozen solid. As condensation flowed down the wall, it poured over a photo of my sister and myself. This happened the first year after she died while I stifled my tears and hid my grief from my young children. I have also seen kitchen taps continue to leak after they have been fixed and dryer vents that drip for no reason ... and I have seen a laptop covered in water that had no business starting up the next day, spring into life – fully recovered – as if nothing had ever happened.

As I have sat in personal reflection and exploration of my inner self while writing the stories and tales that have made up this project, I have sat and recalled details and emotions that I have then relived anew. With eyes closed and cup of tea in hand, I have looked on as an observer in my own life. The tales that I have told from my younger years have shown me clearly that my

desire to belong and to be accepted saw me let go of pieces of myself, as I hid my true thoughts, gave away my opinions and surrendered to the will of others. In all of these instances I had no concept of the cost or true value of what I was giving away. In trying to be included I lost myself until what I had to offer was no longer a picture of my authentic identity at all.

One of the gifts of this project and writing in an autoethnographic voice has been the ability to write from a place of wholeness – and by that I do not mean the perfect, polished appearance that has never been cracked or damaged. By sharing my tales of insecurity, heartbreak and doubt, I feel I have been given permission to include every element of my identity within these pages. I have written as a mother, a student and an artist, drawing when I thought ink would depict more than my words had the power to do. I have also written as an energy healer that is flawed and human, with a vulnerable and broken side, filled with doubt and afraid of the criticism of those around me. But as a writer, who pulls all of these identities together and speaks from a place of totality, I have found my voice: the broken and wounded, the proud and talented; the human part that is me. As I have explored the fragmented personal stories that lay within, some buried deeper than others, I brought them all together and saw them in their completeness. This authentic view of my inner self is the awareness that this project has given me. In the quiet moments when I silenced my rambling mind, I came to know who I am and who I have always been.



I have been trying to find a story about awareness to include in this project for the better part of two months. In moments filled with angst when the words wouldn't flow and I struggled for ideas, I often closed my computer, surrendering to the fact that the story would come when it was supposed to. On those days when my hands lay empty, I surrendered and accepted that the story that I needed to tell, hadn't happened yet. The irony is that the very act of recognizing this fact was in itself, a demonstration of awareness and the more I looked at the elements within this project the more I saw that awareness was already interlaced throughout every topic I had explored.

I found this subject nestled within my examination of 'stopping' and 'grounding'; steps that both required that I be attentive to the lifeforce that is always around me. In both of these elements, I found that the easiest way to stop the ever-flowing thoughts that continually race through my mind was to focus my attention on my awareness. As soon as my concentration shifted to what impressions and feelings I was noticing around me, that is when the rabble of unruly thoughts stopped and I could connect with the energy around me.

When I explored the nuances and details that flowed throughout the notion of intention, it was my awareness of this element that helped me identify the way it threaded its way through my entire energy healing process, working as much with my heart and emotions as it did with my thinking mind.

Awareness is also the key to viewing the self as healer and it is the vehicle that allowed me to look inwards so that I could hear my own inner knowing and connect with the answers that

I held within. This focus is also the key to illuminating hidden beliefs and blocks to healing that cannot be seen from the outside; in fact, without a deep awareness and reflection on our own inner thoughts, these obstructive elements can never be discovered or removed. It was also this inner examination that was key to recalling my own personal stories and uncovering my hidden fears regarding vulnerability, allowing me to perceive my thoughts and actions in a new light.

When I spoke to my teachers about the significance of timing in energy healing work, they illuminated the importance of being aware and respecting the individual healing journey that their clients are on. Awareness directed inwards was also the integral element that allowed me to discover my limiting subconscious beliefs and this self-awareness is key when arriving at the 'aha moments' that both Joyce and Sam described.

It is also an act of self-directed awareness that Joyce identified as the element that helped her distinguish intuitive knowledge from knowing that comes with experience or from her own imagination. Awareness was also the element that allowed Sam to sense the intuitive information that she was receiving through her own various pathways and channels.

And finally, without this act of fine and focused attention, I would not know the sensations of life force that move across my hand. I would not be able to connect to these feelings and link them with my intentions, sending them out to aid in my healing work. Awareness is how I feel energy and how I know it. Awareness is how I have come to know myself.

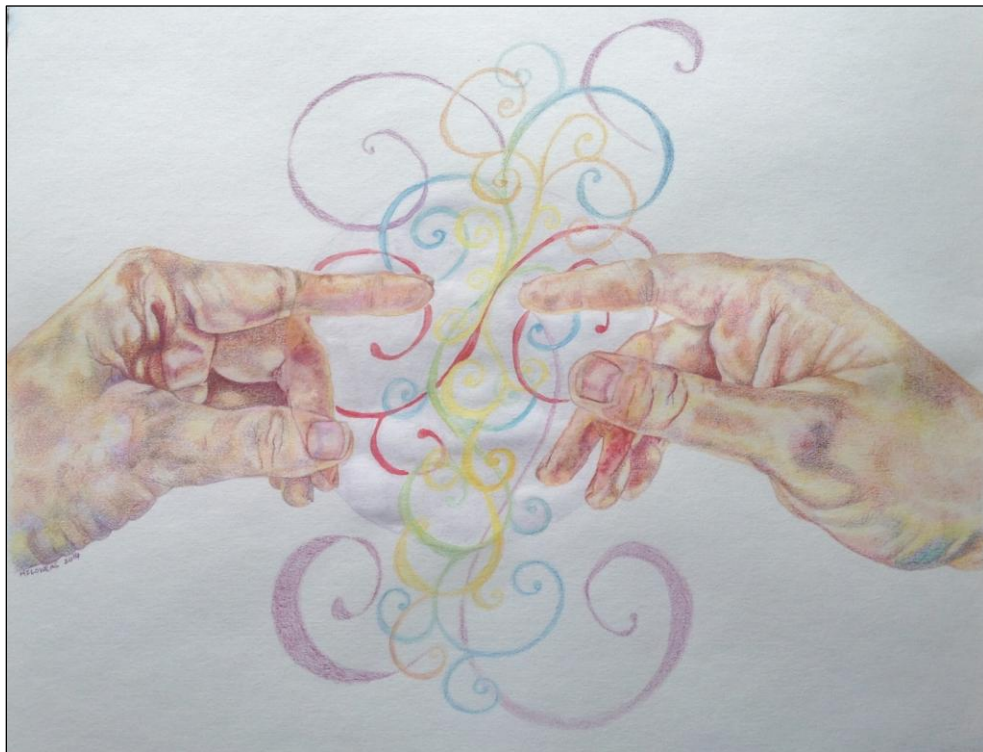


Figure 7: Michelle Flowers, 2014. *Awareness*. [Watercolour pencil on paper].



## Chapter Four: Autoethnography

### Stories as research

*As I sit at my desk and take a sip of my cold tea I offhandedly think about putting the kettle on for a fresh brew. I am distracted by the work at hand however, and I continue to consider the piles of text books that lie around me on my desk. I am reading about autoethnography and learning how this methodology will guide my writing process. I have already begun submerging myself into the body of my research but I am still discovering the roads and pathways that will help me uncover what it is that I wish to say. As I flick through the pages of one of these text books, looking for something that might be a useful and supportive reference, my eye is caught by the words: Crocodile Dundee (Scott-Hoy, 2009). I drop my previous agenda without a second thought and I dive straight into the story, feeling camaraderie for Karen Scott-Hoy, an Australian academic and autoethnographer. In this story, she talks of nursing her young child and her family's reaction to the events in New York on 9/11 and she openly shares the fears of a mother for the world her children will inherit. Her writing touches me on so many levels: the memories I have of my own nurslings, thoughts of where I was on that day, and the resonance of an Australian voice, a little piece of home that I catch onto and grip tightly being an expat in a foreign land. When the story is done, I close the book and emerge from a slight stupor, trying to recall what it was that I had been doing.*

*This happens to me time and time again; the call of the autoethnographic story lures me in, and without fail, I fall head first into the tale. There is practically nothing that I can do to resist and for days and sometimes months afterwards, I think about the stories I have read and the remnants that remain in my memories.*



When I began my research on energy healing and I realized that I had a story to tell and a voice that I wanted to use; I knew that I wanted to share my research in storied form. The power that autoethnographic tales had over me was something I couldn't ignore and more than anything, I wanted to write like this and share what I knew about energy healing in similar inspirational tales. As I read more about autoethnography, I discovered that "stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds" (Ellis, 2000, p. 32) and they are the "primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). I also found that research that uses stories, or narratives, holds a perspective that the "human experience [is one] in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. [Therefore] story... is a portal through which a person enters the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Finding these references made me think about stories as more than tools for affecting my reader. They made me think of humanity and the way story telling helps us understand our own lives. When I saw



the power of story to help uncover hidden answers that lie within, I hoped that it would help me discover why I was so reluctant to speak about energy healing in an academic space and why it was so difficult for me to own the identity of energy healer.

As I began my own autoethnographic process, it became clear to me that humankind has always had stories and what I was discovering in the writing and remembering of mine, was the intimate and personal way that they can lead to a deeper understanding of our own lives. As I wrote I learnt more about myself and the phenomenon of energy healing than I ever thought possible. When I read the following quote from Davis and Ellis (2008a) I knew unequivocally that I had found the research methodology I was looking for.

Our goal is to open up conversations about how people live.... I want to linger in the world of experience, you know, feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it. ...I want to write from my bones – from losing enough of my self-consciousness to form connections, in a way that takes my breath away, tastes and looks and feels, and opens up a place of understanding. (p. 110)

This is how I found autoethnography – or perhaps, more accurately; this is how autoethnography found me.



### **So this is autoethnography**

*I'm sitting here, poised in front of my computer with fresh tears drying on my cheeks. The salt has left my skin feeling taut; I'm tired of holding in my tears. There are so many and they always threaten to overflow, but I don't have time. I never have time. I need to get my son from preschool in a little under an hour. I'm glad I didn't wear mascara today.*

*I have just read parts of Lee Murray's (2010) autoethnographic dissertation. Lee is one of my committee members and I was looking for inspiration on how to transform my wordy proposal into something that is written with an autoethnographic flair. As I read her touching words with her real and human life captured right before me on the page, the tears began to run down my cheeks. I felt empathy for her pain and my heart broke as I read her story. As I moved through the pages, I recognized my own grief, waiting on the sidelines, poised for an opportunity to pour out as well. It doesn't take much: a Tim Horton's commercial, an ad for Qantas, a movie where somebody dies, and there I go.*

*So, this is autoethnography!*



## How did I get here?

So, how exactly did I get here? Let me take you back. Imagine if you will, my first proposal defense (there will be three). I'm proposing a master's research project that will be a heuristic inquiry into the phenomenon of intuition as experienced by female alternate health practitioners. Quite the mouthful! I have just finished my presentation and excitedly, I sit listening to the feedback from my committee.

*The bright sun pushes its way into the room, bullying its way past the blinds that are drawn in an attempt to subdue its brazen presence. It is late spring and the feeling that the weather is finally warming up only adds to my excitement. I am buzzing from the raw energy that speaking in public always brings me and I can hardly keep my legs still as they bounce under the table. I anticipate a question from one committee member and answer it before she has finished speaking. She is pissed. I try to slow down, to be respectful... but I can barely keep up with my inner thoughts. I knew what she was going to say. I just knew. I answer the questions, I listen to the comments. Could this be it, am I nearly done? Can I begin my research now? And then another question:*

*"You write so well, have you ever considered autoethnography?"*

*Boom. I'm stopped dead in my tracks. Literally, the nervous energy vanishes and I'm shocked into stillness for a moment. Part of me wonders how they could have read my mind. I had been considering autoethnography for another story I wanted to write, the story about my sister's death; one that has been clawing its way out of my heart and demanding to be told for the last few years. But this isn't the time nor the place to talk about that story. I answer slowly, carefully, quite unsure what this new suggestion might mean.*

*"I've considered it for another project I have in mind but it's not related to my thesis," I reply, all the while feeling my brow furrow while my mind races off in a million different directions.*

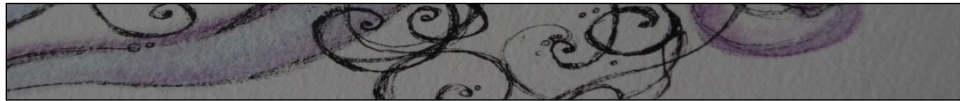
*Really... autoethnography? Could I do that? They would let me do that? They think I can write? Oh my God, I would have to start all over again and rewrite my whole proposal. I don't know if I want to do that. I don't know if I have enough stories about being a healer. But my God, I could write a story like the ones that I read in secret, the ones that draw me in and steal me away, holding me captive in the world of the storyteller.*

*My thoughts spin as the meeting closes and I nod my head and agree to consider this new suggestion. I leave the room feeling a little numb and not quite sure as to what comes next. I wasn't expecting to be sent off in a new direction. Although I'm slightly reluctant to re-write my entire proposal, I can't ignore the seductive call of autoethnography. The opportunity to write is enticing. It feels like I've been handed a delicious but sticky meal that will drip down my chin and make a mess of my hands. And while I might normally devour this meal behind closed doors lest someone see the mess I make of myself, I will need to eat in plain sight, fully exposed and open to jeers and pointing fingers. The thing with autoethnography, though, is that if I take that first bite, then I'll be under its spell and any other research plan will pale in comparison. I consider the implications but I fear it is too late, I am already bewitched.*



*I borrow Carolyn Ellis's novel, "The Ethnographic I" (Ellis, 2004) and read it over the summer break. As I watch my children play with the hose or run around in the sun, I sit back in my garden chair and become enveloped in its pages. Each time that I open it, I am drawn into the stories and I cannot help the secret thrill I feel each time I pick it up. The stories pull me in and leave me thinking about them long after I have put the book down and walked away. I'm amazed that this is an academic text: it is so easy to read and yet there, embedded within the stories is all the information I need on how to conduct this type of research. I wonder if other students know you can write like this.*

*As I read this text, I think about my stories about intuition and energy healing and how they would look in this research format. I get excited about the possibilities as I daydream about my final project. To open a window of understanding on this topic through story and narrative would have the ability to do what statistics and dialogue on theory could never do. My world is changed. I'm hooked, absolutely and completely. I want to do this.*



Over the summer break that followed my first proposal presentation, I read about autoethnography while I looked after my three young children. The four month hiatus, however, slowly and painfully turned into twelve months as I took leave from my studies in order to find the funds to pay my outstanding fees. With only one of my three children in school part time, there was no extra money for tuition, let alone childcare while I worked or studied. I felt pinned against a wall that I couldn't knock down – I didn't want to halt the forward movement of my schooling but no matter how many rocks I looked under, there was no extra cash. I talked to everyone I could think of asking for advice, all the while I was raging on the inside against the unfairness that had frozen me in place.

As I churned with frustration and impatience, I slowly counted the months that felt like they were idling by. All of this time, however, I found I was grieving a part of my identity that had been whipped out from beneath my feet. I missed being a student; the freedom of walking on campus, learning new things and conversations that didn't involve diapers and toilet training. I realized in the most painful way possible, that for me, being a student meant independence and a life that wasn't based on being a mother. The year of unhurried months turned slowly however, and in the end, I had no choice but to stop fighting the meandering current and to just let go and float.

In that time, as I continued to search for funding I changed departments and programs; I swapped supervisors and I jumped through academic hoops. I also took the leap from a novice energy healer that was practicing on family and friends to someone working in a clinic space, treating a small number of clients in the evenings when my husband was home to watch the kids. As I contemplated the year that had me paralyzed with regards to my studies, a small part of me wondered if it was the universe's way of telling me it was time to get on with the healing work I had been too afraid to do. As I finally began practicing energy healing and getting paid for my work, I received a small number of referrals through word of mouth. I found I loved the work but

I was still afraid to advertise myself directly and tell people what I did. I heard the questions that were whispering in my mind:

“What if I’m not ready? What if I’m not good enough?”

Despite my internal fear and self-doubt I kept working in my small practice and my confidence grew with every treatment that I gave. Eventually, my 12 month break from school ended and at last I returned to my studies.

At the end of that long meandering year, I enrolled in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies: a ‘choose your own adventure’ kind of journey where I was able to take classes that interested me and supported my academic goals. As I took classes that were structured around transrational ways of knowing and Indigenous epistemologies, I finally found a safe space to talk about my experiences as an energy healer within the academy. This return to my studies allowed me to tentatively articulate my previously self-censored and hidden voice. I was finally discovering what it was that I wanted to say.

After I completed my semester’s coursework, my thoughts turned back to my research and what direction it might go after so much time away. It was the end of winter and spring had begun pushing up against the frozen landscape trying to get a foothold, casting everything with a new fresh start kind of energy. It was during this time of changing seasons and new beginnings that I met with MJ, my supervisor, to discuss my work, some funding she had found me and a possible change in research topic.



## Moving forward

*When MJ tells me that she has found some funding for my research, I literally jump up and down when I get off the phone.*

*“Thank God, I’m finally moving forward,” I say out loud as I look back on the last 16 months that my studies had frozen in place.*

*“And what is more, I no longer have to research the topic of intuition. I can focus purely on energy healing, the topic I have always wanted to study but never thought was really possible within the academy,” I tell my husband as he looks up at my sudden outburst. As I continue jumping around the room in excitement he smiles at me, as if he is watching a child who has just opened a present that they have always wanted.*

*I exhale, grateful beyond words for the support and encouragement. This changes everything.*

*The next time that I meet with MJ, I bring “The Ethnographic I” with me, but the book doesn’t come out of my bag. While we briefly discuss using autoethnography, MJ has concerns. She suggests I use phenomenology: a methodology that will answer my research question very*

*well, will be easier (and quicker) to complete and better received within academia. Because the funding is to support a literature review and interviews with half a dozen healers, I realize that there is no way I can undertake something as contentious as autoethnography; something that for all intents and purposes, focuses on stories about the self. When MJ sees my hesitation, she reassures me that phenomenology is still a very useful research approach, and perfect to answer my research question: What is energy healing? So, I put my focus here and the fact that I will finally be investigating a topic that is close to my heart while I reluctantly release my hold on autoethnography. I don't want to do anything to jeopardize the financial support that my family desperately needs. As I look towards this promised income, I feel that my own personal desires must now take a back seat to the greater good. Like so many other instances in my life, I give in and let go of my deepest wishes, taking up the advice of my supervisor and the financial needs of my family. After struggling for so long, the funding is too important to risk losing because I want to use a methodology as controversial as autoethnography.*

*So I nod and accept the advice, trying to focus on the fact that I am finally moving forward. It makes sense, it's logical. It will help me finally get this master's project finished. However, whilst my outer countenance moves on, eager to be working on my thesis again, my inner self struggles with a painful and impassioned debate. For the moment, I stifle down the personal desire that has grown and percolated over the year that I sat waiting and I give sway to my logical self. It tells me to be quiet and that passion and desire have no bargaining power in the choice of methodology. I need to move on. I need to finish my program. How could I know that my heart would be such a stubborn and irrational beast? While I let logic lead me away down the road of another methodology, my resistant spirit quietly murmurs "But I had a story to tell, I had something to share. I wanted to do this. I wanted this so much."*



*It is the day of my second proposal defense (remember, there will be three). I have packed my laptop and my notes for the trip to the campus. I'm in high spirits, excited and a little nervous before my presentation. I pace all over the house waiting for my mother in law to arrive so she can watch my children. I jump a little when I hear the phone ring and rush to check the caller ID to see if I have time for this conversation before I leave. I see that it is MJ, so I answer, curious to see what she might want so close to our meeting time. When she says hello, I notice that she has a tone in her voice, a 'you are never going to guess what happened' kind of tone. She sounds simultaneously apprehensive and expectant, as if she is waiting to see how I will react. I go downstairs where I won't be interrupted and I sit down slowly, perching on the edge of my seat. The nervous energy hasn't fully abated and I have absolutely no idea what she is going to say. Mary (my committee member from Regina – a city that is two-and-a-half hours away) thought that the meeting was tomorrow. She won't be able to Skype in for my proposal defense today because she has another commitment at the same time.*

*I notice how calm I feel, aware that anybody else might be upset at this hiccup and delay. But part of me knows that there is a reason for this confusion. I don't believe in accidents; there is always something else going on when mix ups like this happen. This perspective is part of my*

*healing ontology, the view that all things happen when they should for reasons we sometimes cannot see. I caution myself to think about what that hidden factor might be but before I can set my calm reasoning mind to the task of considering my options, my heart begins leaping out of my chest. Here is my opportunity.*

*“Go on, speak,” I urge myself.*

*While I gather my courage and find the words I want to say, I listen to MJ’s advice. I can go ahead with the meeting, missing an important member of my committee or I could reschedule the appointment, taking the opportunity to address some recent feedback on my proposal and make a few important changes that have been suggested. But..... here, here is my chance... leap God damn it.*

*“What about autoethnography?” I ask.*

*I’m terrified of bringing it up with MJ again. I know we have had this conversation before. The time to fight for this methodology has come and gone. But I have never let it go. I want this so badly. And so, I question in my excited, fast-paced voice that barely stops to take a breath:*

*“What if this bump in the road was meant to be? What if phenomenology isn’t the right methodology? What if I break for the summer and while I am home with my kids, I take the time to rewrite my proposal again?” (Am I crazy? Do I really want to rewrite it again?)*

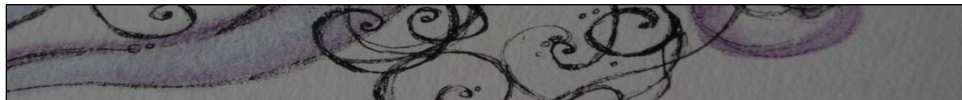
*I am all of a sudden giddy and convinced and the passion comes out in my voice. I see the scheduling confusion as an opportunity not an error. Although I want to write in an autoethnographic voice and I am positive I can do it well, it isn’t my confidence or desire that have me asking for this opportunity. Because I believe everything happens for a reason, I see this bump in the road as a sign that shouldn’t be ignored. I throw all of my faith into that perspective and get swept away with the possibilities. I feel it in my bones. It is as if the whole universe is conspiring to have me write my story and without looking, I fling myself into the air. I want a shot at it. I want to write an autoethnographic thesis.*

*When I take a moment to reflect on why this methodology is so important to me, I think about the feelings I get when I write. To me, autoethnography represents the opportunity to write freely, in flowing prose that pours forth from my heart. When I write like this, I feel that I am inspired by Spirit and guided by a muse that takes me by the hand and becomes my writing companion, showing me the way. This inner light is also my witness as I struggle, stumble and fall, get up and push through, finding myself anew with each sentence that I capture on the page. As my feelings spill out before me, unhampered and uncensored by the usual academic vernacular, I step outside of my fear of being visible and vulnerable and I let the writer in me appear. When I write in this way, I recognize the same ethereal emotions that I experience when I do energy healing and I see my writing as another pathway that leads me to a sense of universal connection. Of course, in the heat of the moment as I try to convince MJ to let me attempt a project of this type, none of these ideas make their way into words. And so, I hold my breath and hope.*

*MJ cautiously agrees. She knows autoethnography is not an easy methodology to embrace. Not everyone can write with emotion and creativity, weaving stories around their*

*research. Autoethnography also requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to share your private self with the outer world. Not only are your life experiences the focus of your work, but your own inner thoughts, emotions and humanity become the mortar that holds the words together. It is a difficult methodology to take on and she has no idea if I can even write like this or how I would include the voices of other potential research participants. But my passion has affected her and I know her own intuition is telling her to pay attention to the reason this meeting didn't go ahead.*

*As she gives me the go-ahead, MJ provides a caveat. She wants me to do a pilot interview and write it up so that I can show her what autoethnography and energy healing might look like when they are married together. This will show her if I can write this way and how I might capture interviews within my own stories. I feel relief, excitement and a touch of incredulity. The journey to this point has been a long one but now more than ever, I am ready for it to begin.*



### **Why I want to write**

As part of my pilot autoethnographic story, I take out my journal and explore the reasons that are driving me to write. I include it in the piece I submit to MJ, in an attempt to explain why this means so much to me.



Journal entry: 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2012

As I think about what I want to write, brief memories and stories rise in my conscious mind. I recall their details and mentally catalogue them, taking note so that I have them close at hand in case I decide to use them. But just as quickly as they surface, my attention has already settled on another element of my story. Why I want to write. I feel I should get this down, to explore these emotions and swim in these waters for a while. I figure they will set the scene and give the reader a glimpse of who I am, but I also feel the thrill that begins to stir. I enjoy writing. I enjoy connecting to my soul for inspiration and looking for the right word: feeling out the nuance that succinctly captures what it is that I am trying to say. I enjoy the creation of a written piece, from the internal exploration to the reading of the final draft. Sometimes I have been so immersed in the writing process that when I step back to read what has appeared before me on the page, I don't recall choosing the words. I feel a little startled at the product before me and I often think:

“Wow. I like that. Did I really write that?”

The element I like the most, however, is that subtle yet unmistakable, touch of grace. In these deeply creative moments, when I lose myself to the language that is moving through me, I feel my heart open and I realize that I have allowed Spirit to speak. These moments flow from my core, spreading throughout my being as they bring me peace and connect me to everything around me. Writing, for me, is a spiritual act.

Another hugely important and intensely personal influence on my desire to write is the memory of my sister. She was a writer; a gifted and inspired wordsmith who created the most amazing work. The letters she wrote to me over the years were written with the most infinite skill. I feel that in conversing with her, I have unwittingly honed my craft, apprenticing to a master. I think of her when I write and wonder if she would be proud of me?

The other element that is only just forming in the corners of my mind as slight tendrils of inspired thought is the ability of emotive writing to describe a feeling or sensation that logical analytical writing will never touch. So much about the phenomenon of energy healing that I have known is about overflowing feelings and non-rational sensations that leave me lost for words. In describing these impressions and shining a light on the inner world of an energy healer, I need to go where academic authors have rarely travelled. To tell my story fully, with all of the moving accounts and hints of otherworldly realities, I must write from my heart.

So these are the reasons I want to write. For the pure enjoyment of the process, the deep and personal contemplation and the quietness that comes over me as I wait for the right word to float to the surface; this is why I could not let go of this methodology. This creative process becomes a beautiful and sacred act if I write with my heart and that is what I intend to do.

I don't know how my finished thesis will look, or how the pieces will be joined together, but I know that my voice must be part of this work. The story that has yet to be created has in fact, been moving with volition of its own for years. It has been moving within me, urging me to continue, biding its time until I could move forward and bring it to life. In surrendering to this desire, in agreeing to be the channel for these words, I have given my promise: to produce a body of work that honours the Spirit moving through me. In contemplating the upcoming months, I was going to voice my hopes for what I might achieve. But in all honesty, I'm not hoping, unsure of what will eventuate. What I feel is a certainty that I have something important to share and that in allowing the voice of this passion to overflow I will accomplish what I came here to do.





As I wrote this emphatic and emotional piece, explaining why I so desperately wanted to write, I was cocooned in a moment of bliss. Finally being allowed to write creatively within academia was so liberating that I had no idea where this intimate journey would actually lead.

*After I email my pilot autoethnographic story to MJ, I head out to the campus. My department has put on a social event to celebrate the beginning of the semester. I don't stay long however and soon find myself walking through the trees and beautiful grounds that surround the old buildings at the university. It is warm outside and I have that feeling of freedom that I always have when I'm walking across the school campus, free of children and liberated from my family commitments for those brief moments until I'm home once again. I check my phone for emails before I head back to the car, and there is one from MJ. It's about the pilot.*

*She loves it!*

*She tells me she is touched by it and calls it powerful. I stop walking and hold the phone still so that I can re-read the email and enjoy the message over again. I did it. I'm ecstatic. Not only can I write my thesis in an autoethnographic voice, but I have touched someone with my words.*

*I have affected them and for a moment, left them speechless as they react to what I have written. My heart bounds within my chest and the grin spreads across my face. I practically skip back to my car. I don't exhale with relief, but I feel as if I inhale and take the first breath that comes with the beginning of a new life. They say that autoethnography chooses you – well, she has me. Now, let's see where she will lead?*



## **Finding my voice**

*As I begin researching my proposal, MJ sends me an email putting me in touch with a grad student she knows that is also working on her master's thesis using this methodology. Her supervisor Lee, has already agreed to join my committee. We exchange details and meet one afternoon for tea. When we start talking, I am immediately drawn to Sally<sup>24</sup>, her love of books, her health background and the fact that she is also a mother. We fall into a friendly conversation so easily that I forget to order tea. She has written down some notes for me with the names of autoethnographic books and authors that she has found helpful along her own journey. She particularly recommends Tessa Muncey's book "Creating Autoethnographies" (2010).*

*"I enjoyed it so much that I went out and bought my own copy," she says.*

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<sup>24</sup> A pseudonym.



*I scribble furiously making sure I have the details and make a mental note to borrow it from the library as soon as possible.*

*As we talk, Sally tells me about her research and immediately lets me into her life, sharing stories that are painful and intimate and that shock me with their details. I recall one story in particular for days after our meeting and wonder at people and how prejudiced they can be. I feel a deep respect for this woman and her courage to share her story so openly and fearlessly. It is clear to me that autoethnography can be a cathartic, healing experience. Of course, the warning with this methodology is that you do this work in the public eye, for all the world to see. I think about my own story and privately compare it to Sally's. I don't think it will carry the tragedy and pain that her tale obviously does. Can I still write it using this methodology? Will it be evocative enough to capture the reader and draw them in? I begin to have my first doubts.*

*Later on I read a comment by Ruth Behar in The Ethnographic I (Ellis, 2004) in which she exclaims that if personal research of this type "doesn't break your heart (then it) just isn't worth doing" (Behar, 1996, p. 177). Dorothy Allison also speaks about writing in this passionate style when she talks about her desire to "take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again." (Allison, 1994, p. 180). Whoa! I'm instantly impressed and yet cautious at the same time. I want to move people with my writing but I don't think this will be a story that will break your heart. I feel more doubt. Perhaps this isn't the right fit after all. I ask my committee member Lee about it in one of our early meetings.*

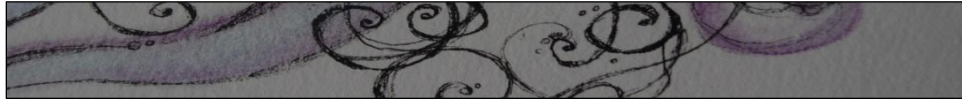
*"Autoethnography doesn't have to break your heart but it will affect the heart, head and spirit of the reader," she reassures me.*

*"Ahhh, ok. I understand, that is perfect. That is exactly what I hope to do," I reply, feeling reassured by her words.*

*I find Tessa Muncey's Creating Autoethnographies (Muncey, 2010) in the library and borrow it along with some other books, including my favourite autoethnographic text: The Ethnographic I (Ellis, 2004). I think of this text like a bible and it quickly becomes a constant companion over the upcoming year, re-borrowed more times that I can count and covered in post-it- notes and page markers that highlight inspirational and important quotes and passages. These autoethnographic manuals blow open my view on this methodology. As I explore its evolution within academia I come to a deeper understanding of the importance of having a voice within my own research.*

*My own voice! There it is: I fully let go of the initial concern that I had when I met Sally and I worried my story didn't contain enough tragedy and angst to 'qualify' for this methodology. I realize that isn't the point at all. While an emotional connection to my audience is still important, the one essential feature that I am continually attracted to as I read through all of these autoethnographic references, is the presence of my own voice within my work. I feel that this specific element of autoethnography speaks to my experience of being an energy healer within the academy, particularly my time spent in the College of Medicine. The feeling that I had whenever I sat in class or walked the venerable old halls of the old University hospital, was that I was an interloper and that I needed to keep quiet lest I was discovered trespassing. I feel as if this methodology is giving me permission to have a voice. Autoethnography is a methodology*

*that says that what I know, matters (Wall, 2006) and what I know about is energy healing and how it feels from the inside perspective. This is the voice that needs to be present in my work: the voice of the energy healer.*



### **Autoethnography and vulnerability**

*As I continue reading my autoethnography references, I come across stories about vulnerability and the pain and fear that may appear when we write. When I read about the reactions that these educated and articulate researchers have experienced, I come face-to-face with my own terror. Now that I am looking at my identity as an energy healer, I realize just how afraid I am to speak about this within academia. I knew that I held back on that information, guarding it and keeping it quiet but as I begin to write my autoethnographic stories, I comprehend just how afraid I am to reveal myself like this.*

*“Oh my God, what have I done?” I ask myself when I realize that once I write this thesis, I will be exposed with no chance of taking it back or hiding behind my silence.*

*“I’m not as confident and articulate as my autoethnographic mentors. How will I ever defend my story? How will I answer my critics?” I think to myself.*

*I turn to my journal to capture the intense emotions that are overflowing.*



Journal entry: January, 2013

As I read about the vulnerability that is an essential part of autoethnographic work, I consider the soul searching that I must do and the personal depths that I will be expected to traverse.

But the stories go further. I read about those that have gone before me and the hurtful reactions they have received, from critics that are voicing more than just a slur against their chosen methodology. In the piece that I have just read by Tessa Muncey (2010) she is publicly torn to pieces in a conference where she has shared her autoethnographic story. The accusations hurled at her were not all about the self-indulgence of researching one's own life; they became a diatribe about the choices she made in that life and the person she grew into. Am I prepared for that critical response? Do I want to stand still before an audience, quiet and collected, facing all possible reactions to my work

when some of those responses might be vicious accusations about my personal life, my actions and my beliefs? I will never get to ask my own questions regarding the personal story of my accuser and yet, in my imagination they stand before me, armed with the intimate details of my life story. I have always considered myself thin-skinned and sensitive, stemming from my timid younger self, trying to go unnoticed, quiet of voice, easily overwhelmed by the brash personalities of others. The vulnerability that is an essential part of autoethnography is more than a personal journey within. It is a conscious choice to expose that naked and private self to the world at large. Am I ready to step into the public arena for all the world to see, openly declaring my acceptance of all criticisms and judgements merely by my presence, regardless of my terror that I might be devoured whole by the harsh opinions of others?

I step back for a moment, away from the fear and paralyzing dread that would stop me in my tracks and silence my words before they are uttered or cast upon the page. I think about my younger self: that small girl with her apprehensive voice and wide, fearful eyes. I recognize her but I also know that I am not that sensitive child anymore. I take a deep breath and reflect upon my life. I have been growing into myself and my beliefs for the better part of four decades and along that journey, I have discovered a personal ontology that has truly become my reality. It is vastly different from mainstream society, a fact that both unsettles me and makes me proud at the same time. I know that I consciously separate this private life from my scholarly endeavours because of the striking difference between these two worlds. I have hidden this inner self when I am in the classroom and kept it well away from my school assignments. I recognize that to some extent, I have even kept these thoughts silent within my own mind when I am supposed to be in 'academic' mode. I ask myself "why?" Is it really because these thoughts do not belong?

Whilst my mind contemplates arguments to address this question, I notice a quiet indignation forming in my chest. When I explore it and contemplate my emotional reaction, I find that this resentment suddenly threatens to overflow. It becomes a powerful partisan that will no longer stand for the silencing of my voice within my own education.

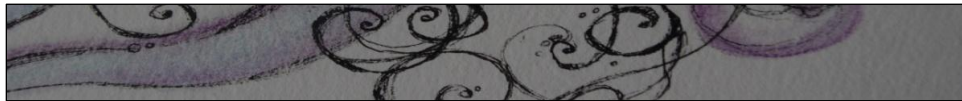
This feeling of injustice for the academic restraint that has kept my world divided all of these years, pushes me up, makes me stand and move towards the front of the room. I realize that I *want* to speak, I *want* a voice. I want to bring this deep inner self out into the light and find a place for it within academia. I find that the stories that I wish to share are rushing forward of their own accord, sensing the door quietly opening and unwilling to remain hidden any longer. I know that in empirical science, you are supposed to leave your subjective self at the door, and enter, divided and fragmented to clearly interpret what you see. I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if my stories, once released, will stay quietly at the back of the room.

I sit and weigh the fear that keeps me silent against my desire for a voice. Fear of exposure versus indignation at having been hidden from view in the first place.

I sigh.

I still cannot ignore the little girl within who spoke with a whisper and blushed red whenever she was called upon. She is me and her memories are the foundation of the woman I have grown into. But I cannot ignore the weight that kept that small creature in her place either. The social and academic constraints that aim to silence us all if we walk against the flow.

I do not do this thing because I am strong enough to bear out the retaliations, accusations and slurs that may be levelled at me. I do this thing because I want to have a voice.



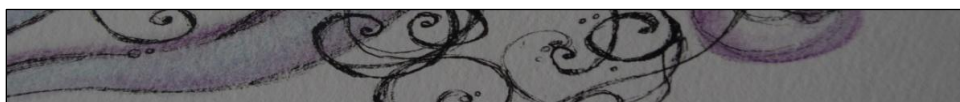
*As I capture my fears about my vulnerability in my journal, I find the indignation that is quietly brewing in my chest. The more that I read my autoethnographic texts, the more I stoke the fires of this resentment and bolster the impetus that is encouraging me to write. When I read Carolyn Ellis's (2004) story about the tears she was reduced to by a critic of her early work, I find the encouragement that begins to change my perspective. She shares that what she learnt from that event was that she needed to "concentrate less on how readers' reactions made [her] feel and more on what [she] could learn about others from their responses" (Ellis, 2004, p. 21).*

*Carolyn Ellis's words speak directly to my vulnerability and the fear of judgment that I have been feeling throughout this process. I read her anecdote over and over again in order to cement the advice. Carolyn warns her readers that there will always be criticism of autoethnographic writing but there will also be positive and supportive responses as well. In the end, she writes: "nothing really bad happened. I didn't lose my job, end up in jail, or lose my friends; nor was I severely ostracized" (Ellis, 2004, p. 34). Carolyn tells her audience that sometimes a negative response is hard to deal with "but if you can't get outside your experience to get into other's experience of your experience, then you're too self-absorbed" (Ellis, 2004 p. 34).*

*It is perfect advice for me as I face my fears regarding speaking about energy healing within the academy. A slight change in perspective takes the focus from me and turns it onto my audience and their reactions. Of course, I cannot predict these nor am I responsible for them. It sounds like my description of the self as healer. The detachment that an energy healer must practice with regards to the outcome of their healing work is similar to how I should treat my writing. I need to fill it with my energy and heart-filled intentions and then release it, knowing that I have written from within. The views and responses of others are theirs and all I can do, is learn from them and remember to not take them on board.*

*As I write these words, I feel the solid weight of this perspective settle in and mitigate my fears regarding exposure and vulnerability. It is like another block in the puzzle has slipped into place and I feel the tension in my chest release.*

*“Ahh, I get it now,” I think to myself as I finally realize something that I have never fully appreciated. While I understood cognitively that judgment is a reflection of the person doing the judging, now my heart holds onto this truth and stands a little taller. Everyone who writes autoethnography feels vulnerable; it is a given that is part of the process. It is what I do with those feelings that count.*



### **Congruence between topic and methodology**

As I continued to read about autoethnography as a methodology, I was repeatedly struck by the similarities between this research approach and the topic of energy healing. When I came across the following quote from Art Bochner (2013), I immediately saw a resemblance between this methodology and my experiences in my healing work.

[Something that is] real is what one can feel in his heart or touch in the world and, thus, there is no truth beyond experience. It is what we create ourselves, what we experience and do, that gives meaning to our lives. (p. 50)

These words echoed my understanding of energy healing as they described the way that I have come to know this phenomenon. Because of my experiences, my heart recognizes the sensation of lifeforce when it moves just beyond the boundaries of my fingertips. Autoethnography recognizes the importance of these subjective experiences and creates a place for them to be spoken about and therefore heard within academia. I don't think it would be possible to learn about the inner world of an energy healer without drawing upon the embodied sensations and emotive descriptions that come from the heart. These tools, along with my artwork, are as close as I can get to convey the inspirational and heartfelt reality that I know when energy is moving through me.

As I continued reading about autoethnography as a methodology, I was also struck by the words of Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997). In her book, Reed-Danahay states that the voice of the insider is considered more authentic and true than that of the outsider. This comment mirrors the theme within energy healing that the healer does not know what is healing for the client: only the person receiving the treatment can truly have these answers. In addition to this idea is the observation that I heard from my teachers, that is: when an individual comes to understand or realize a truth about themselves, they access deeper and more profound healing. As I continued my autoethnographic journey I experienced the true depths of this observation. The discoveries that I made could not have been made by anyone but me; I had to look inside to recognize my own story about silencing myself within the academy. And just like the personal healing that my teachers had described, my own realization was profound and deeply healing.

Another area of similarity that I found between autoethnography and energy healing came in the writing of Andrew Sparkes. I was particularly drawn to his work because he has an exercise science background like myself and I felt a certain camaraderie when I read his journal articles. Because many of my peers from my undergraduate degree have followed what I would describe as traditional scientific routes, I was glad to read the work of an exercise scientist who had gone in a qualitative direction. For me, finding his stories somehow meant that this part of me didn't feel as alone or 'different' anymore. In one of his papers, Sparkes (2000) explores the evaluation of autoethnographic quality and the comparison that is often made between rigid criteria seen in traditional positivist research methods.

...given that different epistemological and ontological assumptions inform qualitative and postpositivistic inquiry, it makes little sense to impose the criteria used to pass judgment on one upon the other. Attempts to do so are, at best, misguided and, at worse, arrogant and nonsensical, a form of intellectual imperialism that builds failure in from the start so that legitimacy of other research forms is systematically denied. (p. 29).

"Yes, exactly," I found myself saying out loud when I read this paragraph.

This comment by Andrew Sparkes regarding the diverse epistemological and ontological foundations of positivistic inquiry and qualitative research echoes the disparate natures of western biomedicine and energy healing practices. When I began this project, I found myself struggling with the constraints that I found in a traditional scientific paradigm. The language and descriptions of energy healing that I wanted to use were emotive and alluded to sensations that could not be accurately captured or generalized. And when I was in the depths of my conversations with my teachers and I realized that the client must have a true desire to heal for an energy healing treatment to be of benefit, I saw a prime example of how the foundational underpinnings of biomedicine and energy healing do not operate from a place of similarities. So just like autoethnography and other positivistic research methods, energy healing research protocols cannot be designed using the same guiding principles or assumptions used in other western biomedical studies.

It was also during the conversations that I had with my teachers that I recognized another area of congruence between autoethnography and energy healing. When I was reading a chapter in one of my autoethnographic texts written by Mary and Kenneth Gergen (2002), they named one of the aims of this methodology as an intent to remove the traditional research hierarchies between the author and reader. They explain that this is done by using inclusive and emotive language that acts to decrease the distance between the writer and their audience. By being invited into an autoethnographic story, readers are encouraged to engage in the tale through their own lens and social understanding. In this way, the audience is not assumed to be passive nor ignorant but rather, they are encouraged to react and relate to what they read in their own unique way. This perspective of equality mirrors the relationship between the energy healer and the client; that is, the healer is there to support the healing of the individual and not assume that they know what is healing for their client. I also found these collaborative relationships occurring in the conversations that I had with Joyce and Sam. As we talked, I released my attachment to my scripted questions and I allowed the dialogue to flow wherever it happened to go. As our discussions continued, I fully trusted the process of our meandering conversations and the repository of experience and knowledge that my teachers shared.

One other element of similarity that I noted in my exploration of autoethnography came when I read the book *Creating Autoethnographies* by Tessa Muncey (2010). When Muncey reflects on her own personal writing process, she explains that her inspiration comes when she is doing creative activities like gardening or patchwork quilting. For her, these activities make time disappear and leave her feeling content, satisfied and fulfilled (Muncey, 2010). She recommends that potential autoethnographic researchers access their own creative activities to find a state of bliss and use these feelings as a source of inspiration. She explains that in this space, the author will find a personal voice or style that helps imbue their writing with a nuance that may not be attainable through normal writing habits. When Muncey talks about this state of bliss, I am instantly reminded of the act of energy healing, as I wrote in my final proposal:

When I sink into the altered state from which I engage in my healing work, time appears to stand still and I feel an expanded connection to everything around me. I believe that one of the creative inspirations for writing about the phenomenon of energy healing lies within the intimate act itself.

The final area of similarity that I discovered between autoethnography and the phenomenon of energy healing is the healing potential that both acts contain. Through my own experiences, I have found the act of writing these autoethnographic stories to be cathartic and therapeutic and the self-discovery that has come during this research process has been as healing to me as a series of energy healing treatments. I have no doubt that this was the perfect methodology to explore this topic.



### Challenging discourses

After reflecting on the similarities between autoethnography and the phenomenon of energy healing, I continued learning more about the methodology through my reference books and the act of writing itself. Besides providing a space for my personal voice to be heard within academia, there was one more element within autoethnography that spoke to me personally. This was the idea of challenging discourses.



*It is getting close to the end of the semester and I have organized to give a presentation to my department on my master's research. It is only a short presentation and I know my material, but for some reason I am terrified. As I stand behind the podium at the front of the room and begin to talk, I realize my voice is shaking and I can barely hold eye contact with anyone in the room. I usually get a little nervous before I give a public presentation but I always get over it*



*when I warm up and start speaking. Today, however, I talk too quickly and too quietly and I go way over time. At the end, I know I have done a terrible job.*

*As I stand quietly at the end of my talk, my posture reflecting my relief that it is nearly over, I wait while the people in the room talk amongst themselves. As they work in small groups to answer some reflective questions provided by the department, one woman at the front leans towards me and asks me if I see auras?*

*“No, I don’t,” I say “I actually feel energy with my hands.”*

*“Ahh,” she says. “You know, I see auras. I come from a long line of indigenous healers myself.”*

*“Really?” I ask, my interest immediately piqued but before I can talk to her further, the department representative calls our attention back to the question and answer part of my presentation.*

*As I ask the room if there are any questions, I stand a little taller realizing now that my abject terror about identifying myself as a healer in public was groundless. Here right before me was a voice of support, reminding me that I am not alone in my beliefs.*

*As a few people in the audience raise their hands to signal potential questions, I look to a woman on my right and nod for her to continue. With all of my fear today centred on my topic, I am caught off guard by a question about my methodology.*

*“Tell me how talking to your friends can be considered research? And if you are writing about your own experiences, why isn’t that called an autobiography?” she asks.*

*After spending so many months immersed in text books that justify and defend autoethnography, I forgot that this methodology still elicits doubt and contention within academia. As I think back to those texts, I answer her question with a quote that I remembered from Art Bochner.*

*“Autoethnography is not supposed to address the criteria that traditional positivist research methodologies are held to,” I say. “Instead of validity, reliability and generalizability, I’m going to quote a suggestion from Art Bochner, a proponent of autoethnography. ‘Instead of asking, how can this be true, we could ask, what if this were true? What then?’” (Bochner, 2000, p.267).*

*I am not sure if my answer satisfies my audience but because there are two other students presenting after me, my time runs out and I finally get to sit down. I’m relieved that it is over, yet disappointed about my nervousness.*

*“What was my problem?” I think to myself, but I realize the answer straight away. This was the first time that I had publicly identified myself as an energy healer to people I didn’t know within academia. And now that I see the reactions to my methodology, I realize that the risk of exposing myself to the judgment and criticism of others is essentially doubled. Not only is my topic of energy healing risky and alternate, my methodology is also likely to elicit some negative reactions.*

*With my focus on my topic, I hadn't fully considered the potential response to autoethnography. This methodology doesn't fit the typical positivist research model. I think about quantitative researchers and I see that my creative, emotional exploration of my own experiences and stories is in essence, the polar opposite to objective, clinical studies that investigate data sets with a view to locating proof. With research of this type holding more attention and power within academia, I groan with the realization that I need to brace myself for defense on two fronts.*

*"But there was that comment from the woman who could see auras," I think to myself. "And I have to remember the advice from Carolyn Ellis: to get out of my own experience and pay attention to the other person's reactions to my work so that I can learn more about the person asking the questions."*

*As the next student begins their presentation, I leave my pondering for a later time and I concentrate on the slideshow. But at the back of my mind, I know that I have a lot more to think about.*



*In the days after this presentation, I dive back into my writing and the research of my methodology. As I am reading *Creating Autoethnographies* by Tessa Muncey (2010) I stumble across a better answer to the question from the presentation. Muncey explains that a key distinction that separates autoethnographic research from autobiographies is an attempt to subvert a dominant discourse.*

*"That was the answer I should have given," I think to myself.*

*As I reflect back on the presentation, I decide I want to know more about this element of autoethnography. I want to be able to answer this question fully next time that I am asked to defend my methodology.*

*With a focus on challenging discourses, I think about the congruence between autoethnography and energy healing again. What I discover is that autoethnography has the ability to challenge the power dynamics that exist within research practices as well as disputing the accreditation of 'legitimate' knowledge (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wall, 2006). That is it; that last element speaks directly to me. For so long, my fear regarding my identity as an energy healer within academia came with a recognition of the social judgment that complementary and alternate medicine receives. It is often considered "less" than western biomedicine. Not only is there a hierarchy of power but the other ways of knowing that are fundamental to energy healing practitioners are often considered 'illegitimate' sources of information (Benner & Tanner, 1987). I have been afraid to stand up in front of an academic audience because I didn't know how to defend my alternate healing paradigm. How could I argue the merits of my ontology when I was terrified my audience might think it was all quackery?*

*I find another quote by Art Bochner (2013) in the Handbook of Autoethnography that supports my recent line of thinking. As I read it, I hear myself exhale with appreciation. I think his writing is inspirational and I find myself wishing I could answer my potential critics as eloquently as this.*

*Autoethnography is an expression of the desire to turn social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice, one in which I (as researcher) do not need to suppress my own subjectivity, where I can become more attuned to the subjectively felt experiences of others, where I am free to reflect on the consequences of my work, not only for others but also for myself, and where all parts of myself – emotional, spiritual, intellectual, embodied, and moral – can be voiced and integrated in my work. (p. 53)*

*When I read this statement, I sit back and reflect on what I am doing with my thesis. Not only will my research be providing a voice that challenges the dominant discourse within western biomedicine, it will be doing it in a way that also challenges traditional empirical research practices. I am excited about how perfect the fit is and I feel empowered – something that is a new experience when I think about my research through an academic lens. The terror and vulnerability that I had felt at the beginning of this process has fallen away, totally discarded for the assurances of these inspiring scholars.*

*Other comments that I find in the autoethnographic references that I am reading reinforce this notion of challenging generalizations within academia especially with regards to the sterilization of traditional research against the presence of the author (see Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006). I am particularly drawn to a quote by Charmaz and Mitchell (1997) that states; “silent authorship comes to mark mature scholarship. The proper voice is no voice at all” (p.194). Wow! This comment is clear; there is a marked and very real silencing within traditional research – not only with regards to how it is done but with regards to what your research is about. As I absorb the implications of this remark, I realize that traditional positivist research methodologies require the distancing or making invisible of the researcher from their work and conformity to methods that are considered to be essential in the production of ‘real’ and ‘valid’ science”. As I type these words, I feel that they explain the hidden pressures that I have felt throughout most of my academic life: pressures that require my voice to be silent, in essence, disempowering me and reinforcing the notion that my epistemological and ontological way of being did not belong. Autoethnography is one way that gives me back my voice and my power.*

*As I contemplate these quotes, I remember the indignation that I had begun sensing at the beginning of my research journey. This feeling of indignation has definitely grown and fostered within me a desire to overcome the silencing that I have experienced throughout my academic career. The voice that I wanted to have and the stories that I wanted to tell will be supported by autoethnography and the scholars that have gone before me. When I read their writing, I feel inspired and in a way, unshackled. I feel that their examples have given me permission to open my heart and write with passion and conviction, liberated from any perceived boundaries or parameters that traditional research would require of me. I particularly hear validation in my choice of methodology from Carolyn Ellis (2004) and Tessa Muncey (2010) when they highlight the ability of autoethnography to provide a voice for people that are traditionally left out of social science. When Muncey (2010, p. xi) says that “in order to ... subvert the dominant*

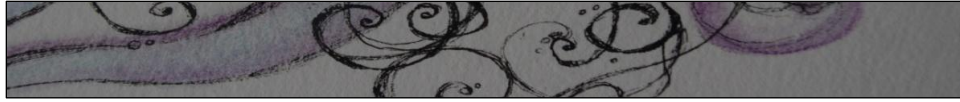
*discourses that underpin much of our research, strategies and techniques need to be found for portraying experiences that don't rely on the affinity of shared assumptions," I realize that she is talking about me. The lack of impassioned voices and stories regarding energy healing in academia shows me that there is room for my voice and the tales that I will tell.*

*When I read this I feel the swelling of emotions within my chest. My ontological position on health and healing is one that definitely doesn't fit with mainstream biomedical thought. But does that mean it shouldn't be heard? The place for my voice within academia is standing there as clear as day and ironically it has been created by the power that I felt had left me voiceless when I first started my graduate program. The influence of western biomedicine has meant that academic representation of energy healing stories is virtually nonexistent. This is where I will speak: into the silence or overlooked whisper that is the energy healer's personal story.*

*As I continue reading through the Handbook of Autoethnographies (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013), I flick through the first few chapters, letting my eyes skim the content until they fall upon sections that capture my attention. When I come across the words of Bonnie Glass-Coffin (in Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013), her writing jumps off the page and grabs me by my shirt front. As I fall under the spell of her tale, I hungrily devour it whole. As an anthropologist working with shamans in Peru, she speaks of a transformational spiritual experience that she had there. She talks about seeing "plants interact with [her] as sentient beings who responded to [her] every action and intention" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p.61). As she reflects on sharing these experiences within the academy she asks if the "record of my adventures with a family that includes plants and animals, rocks and trees, can ever be made palatable to my academic peers" (p. 77). I know exactly how she feels. Although I am bolstered by her story and the fact that I have read it in an academic text, I also hear the caution in her words. Some of the things that I have experienced and the stories that I have shared don't fit nicely within a positivist paradigm. No matter how many times I remind myself that criticism and negative reactions to my work are reflections on the person doing the evaluating, it does not remove my awareness of the social stigma and discomfort that exists regarding my alternate health ontology. I guess that I am still looking to belong.*

*As I continue to read Bonnie Glass-Coffin's story, I find her final quote: "...[But] I believe that in our discipline... the time has come for new beginnings and a new acknowledgement of belonging" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 77).*

*This declaration that it is time for new beginnings inspires me more than I can express and it cements the reasons that I have felt encouraging me to write. I write for those that do not know about energy healing, so that I might open a doorway into another way of looking at the world. I also write for those who have felt the brush of lifeforce against the palm of their hand: that they might read words that resonate with their hearts and remind them of the ethereal space that lies just beyond our physical touch. I want to give words to the magic that is beyond description, so that awareness is expanded and affirmations are felt. I have written because it was what I was inspired to do.*



## Final Reflections

*As I push the return button and exhale an unconscious sigh that signals the end of this final section of my writing, I open my inbox and check my emails. I find one from my brother with photos that he has just stumbled across: pictures of Angelique from her trip to visit him in London. Unaware of the camera, she is walking with purpose, the photo catching her in mid-step as she strides quickly to wherever she is going.*

*I think about her presence and silent encouragement that have kept me company in the writing of this thesis and I see the arrival of these photos as a sign that she is still here. As I have sat writing over the last year and have found myself pausing, searching for a word or a turn of phrase that will capture the feelings and quiet knowings tumbling around in my awareness, I have often thought of her and quietly asked for inspiration. Like a prayer or wish sent out to a writing muse, I considered my sister an intercessory who might help connect me to the flowing poetry and language that always lay within her reach.*

*Now that I am done, I think about that photo of her striding off to her unknown destination, another port, another adventure, and I look back at the journey that I have just undertaken.*

When I began this project, I believed that I would be describing what I knew about energy healing, replete with stories and descriptions of what I had seen, felt and loved. In those early days, it never occurred to me that my research journey would lead me to a deeper personal understanding of this phenomenon than I already knew. Inspired by my conversations with my teachers, however, I focused my introspection on the themes that caught my attention; ideas that Joyce and Sam clearly understood as being profound elements of their own healing practices. It was during this process that the notions of intention and awareness came to the fore and in their exploration I came to understand not only more about energy healing, but I fully experienced the autoethnographic process and the power of writing to discover what lies hidden within.

As my inner contemplation led me to investigate the integral theme of intention, I realized that I had previously considered it from a limited and incomplete perspective. I had believed it was an obligatory initial step in my healing method, yet upon deeper reflection, I came to understand that intention is an ongoing act that links my will with the energy all around me throughout the *entire* healing session. In observing the collaborative action of my intent when it joined with this healing life force, I also discovered the limitations that are provided by verbal thoughts alone. When I conveyed my intent in expansive and expressive emotions, the boundaries that came with a simple linear directive dissipated. This observation clearly showed me the role that my heart plays in communicating with the energy around me.

With this discovery as a foundation, I turned my attention towards the topic of awareness and watched as this deliberate act silenced the ever-present rambling thoughts that habitually tumble through my mind. In this quiet stillness, I understood that directing this attentiveness towards my physical senses is the key that allows me to engage and connect with the flowing life force that is always around me. When I turned this attention inwards, however, I was led to a

more profound realization. As I reflected on my memories and captured them as stories on the page, this inner self-awareness helped me uncover hidden subconscious beliefs that had blocked the flow of energy within my life. This authentic view of myself led me to an understanding of my fragmented identities, the shadow stories that I had banished to the sidelines and the self-censoring that had caused me to continuously walk in two disconnected worlds. In exploring what I had previously known to be fear of exposure and vulnerability, I discovered my own indignation, desire for a voice and self-acceptance lying within.

With this new understanding settling into my consciousness, I returned my gaze to my trepidation about identifying myself as an energy healer within the academy. What I realized as I looked with detachment at the stories that I found there, was an alternate perspective on the one that I had been carrying. While I had believed that the social stigma and lack of acceptance regarding my alternate health paradigm were the features that were silencing me, what I found was that it was in fact myself who was choosing to be silent. As the self-censoring actions that I had carried out throughout my graduate school education no longer served their purpose, I was able to bring my disjointed identities together on the page, to speak with one voice. In capturing these autoethnographic tales that included self-doubt, reservations and uncertainty, I realized that these hidden shadow stories finally completed my exploration of the phenomenon of energy healing as I have experienced it. As I continued to write and discover the peace that came with this inner awareness and self-acceptance, I felt as if my power and story had been returned to me, although in truth, I know that I had never lost either. I had just failed to recognize their potential.

With this new understanding of my pattern of fears and self-silencing, I re-examined the question I had been continually asking myself throughout my research: “how was I supposed to defend myself and my alternate health perspective against potential critics?” With this shift in my internal understanding, I was now able to see that the answer to this question was a simple one: I didn’t have to defend myself at all. Through this new lens I realized that my alternate health paradigm is an intimate part of my larger personal ontology. It is how I understand and interpret my experiences and it creates the lens through which I view my reality. As I recognized the beauty of my own way of being in the world, I could clearly see that each individual has their own ontological understanding that is similarly based on their own personal beliefs, understandings and experiences. What I came to realize is that there is no one reality with a right or wrong perspective whose merits need to be proven, argued or defended. We each create our individual realities every moment that we interact with the world around us and therefore I cannot convince another individual of the virtues of my own ontological understandings at the detriment of their own. Their perspective and worldview holds just as much value and certainty to them as mine does to me and who am I to argue against such things.

So, how do we challenge the distribution of power within the academy, especially as it relates to energy healing and complementary and alternate medicine? My answer to this question is that we can’t. A belief system that holds a hierarchy of knowledge systems believes in this organization and classification. That perspective is someone else’s reality, the viewpoint that they hold onto and perhaps defend tooth and nail.

What we might choose to do, however, is to share our stories and to let them create understanding wherever our words are heard. By sharing our perspective in story, we have the opportunity to leave pieces of our tales behind with our audience so that what they read becomes part of their experiences. It is when we have experiences that do not fit within our understanding

of the world that we are challenged to look at our ontological framework and reassess its boundaries. Perhaps accounts of journeys to hidden places via uncommon trails will spark a contemplative thread that influences perceptions and expands our audience's view of reality.

This is why I chose the emotive language of autoethnography. In capturing the moving emotions and ethereal sensations of energy healing that hide beyond words, my intent was to use my stories to paint a picture of my inner world so that those who wish to understand may get a glimpse of something that is difficult if not impossible to know from the outside. It is my hope that the words that I have crafted will find a place within the heart of my audience, travelling with them for consideration, long after the details of my tale have been forgotten.

And of course, I have also written for those that have felt the movement of energy beneath their hands and those who hold a space for multiple realities within their worldview. This story is also for those who have been to the place where there are no words.



### Epilogue

In the weeks after I submitted my final draft to the external assessor, when I found myself exhaling and floating in the limbo that comes after a steady practice of writing, I sent a copy of my thesis to both of my teachers. I wanted to share the product of our conversations and all that I had learnt over the past year of introspection. I met Sam for lunch one afternoon after she had had a chance to read it, so we could talk about her reaction to my work. After we caught up on life events since I had last seen her, our conversation moved on to my thesis and her thoughts on it and all that it contained.

*"Firstly, I have to say what an enormous privilege it has been to be part of this process," Sam says, and immediately I think that the opposite is true. It was me that received the priceless gift of hearing her stories and learning so much from her.*

*As she goes on to describe her thoughts on the final draft, I find myself exhaling, relieved that I have captured some of the magic of energy healing with my words, magic that Sam has recognized.*

*"For me, the whole thesis was like an opus and the different voices that moved through your writing were like the different sections of an orchestra. The string section would sound out and then you would move into another story and it was like the percussion section was booming right through me," Sam describes as her hands move in front of her like a conductor weaving the music she is imagining.*

*"There is one thing though," she says slowly as her hands move back to her lap and I notice a slight tension in her face as if she is unsure how her next comment will be received. In response, I unconsciously brace myself, preparing to hear what I will need to re-write while the fatigue of the lengthy research process washes over me. I smile and nod however, encouraging*



*Sam to go on as I push my weariness aside. Although I am tired, I want my work to be powerful and emotive and I know that Sam's external perspective will show me what I haven't been able to see from the inside.*

*"At the end of your thesis, I felt like there was something missing. As I listened to the music of the words, I found myself craving one final note, one resounding reverberation that would complete the opus. I don't know if it is a story or an image ..." Sam explains and she lets her voice drop away, leaving me to contemplate what this missing element might be.*

*My mind is blank however, as I try to think what else I have to say. I feel a little lost when no immediate answers rush to fill the silence. But as I let my mind wander to see if anything appears, I find myself reaching out energetically, searching for a sense of what the missing piece might be. And then I feel something sitting there between us, something that is waiting to be discovered: a story that has yet to be revealed. As I sense it sitting there in this 'other' place, waiting patiently to be dressed in a physical garb of words, I realize that I need to travel to meet it so that I can bring it to life through my writing process. Just like so much of this thesis, I won't know what it is that I need to say until I begin to write.*

*The morning after I meet Sam for lunch, I find myself sitting at my computer, leaning into the silence that descends after the morning rush. Now that the kids are all dropped off at school and the echoes of feet rushing out the door have dissipated, I gather my intentions together and I settle into my process. With a hot cup of tea anchoring me to my writing routine, I give myself permission to go a little deeper, to ask what story will close this chapter of my life and with it, complete my thesis. And what comes to mind is one more story about energy healing.*

When I think about my identity as an energy healer, there are many different stories that float through my consciousness, many of which have already appeared in the pages of this thesis. There is however, one final story, one that I have not yet told, one that might also answer the question of 'what comes next?'

Earlier in this research, I told the anecdote of an energy healing treatment that I gave my friend Tinuviel. What I failed to say in that retelling, was the fact that it was one of the last formal healing sessions that I have given. When I began writing my thesis, I found that most of my time and energy was being diverted into the creative act of writing. While I still connected to the healing lifeforce all around me as I wrote, the energy that I needed to craft my thesis often left me drained and unable to give anything else to those around me. In a decision that I balked at, resisted and struggled to accept, I finally came to understand that I needed to let my healing practice go. The piece of advice that finally allowed me to arrive at this decision was something that I have held onto and repeated over and over again when I wavered and had doubts: I needed to let go of something that I loved to make room for something that I loved even more.

Over the last six years I have been testing out and finally accepting the shy and fragile identity of artist. What had been a hobby that I dabbled in for fun, gradually emerged as an integral part of who I am. As I poured more time and energy into my drawing and painting practice, I realized that I came alive when I created something on the page, something that only moments before had not existed anywhere else but in my mind. The movement of my brush and the colour of the paint enchanted me and held me captive, just as the process of writing has done throughout this thesis. With the encouragement of my friends and family, I gradually overcame

my self-doubt and cautiously waded into these unfamiliar waters. Slowly I began to share my art and warily accept the praise and compliments that came my way. It wasn't until I uncovered the story about my year 10 art class in this thesis, however, that I finally had the impetus to fully inhabit this identity and accept the fact that I am an artist.

As I have travelled along this journey of artistic self-discovery, it has been obvious to me that my creative inclinations have an energetic and spiritual lean to them. When I draw the swirling curvy lines that reminded me of the flow of energy beneath my hand, I produce the artwork that I am most engaged with. It never ceases to amaze me that these pieces always flow effortlessly from my brush as if I am just a spectator along for the ride. As I explored these energetic themes in my art, I naturally gravitated towards the subject of the chakras<sup>25</sup>, concepts that I had been introduced to when I was studying yoga philosophy. In traditional yogic teachings, each chakra is understood to be a spinning energy centre within the body and the seven major chakras are represented by seven specific colours. When I began painting my own representation of these chakras I was able to combine my love of painting with my sense of moving energy. It felt like I had found my private calling.

As I explored these energetic themes within my artwork, I found myself drawn to watercolours, a fluid medium that I found perfect for capturing the movement of swirling subtle energy. When I began to share these energetic paintings with my friends, the positive response was overwhelming and unexpected. Having hidden my artwork away for so long, I was giddy and enlivened by the encouragement. As I received requests for commissioned pieces I began to flourish in the process of painting energy and settle into the identity of artist a little further. With each new painting that I undertook, I unconsciously developed a particular process that was very similar to the method that I used when I was doing energy healing. I would sit and ground myself before I began to paint and set my intentions about the art I was about to produce. With each intention, I joined my intuitive awareness to the energy of the individual who had commissioned the painting. As I reached out and connected the movement of my brush to the energy of their individual chakras, I let my separate and independent self slip away and I revelled in the contentment and fulfillment of connection to this universal energy. What I discovered in this artistic exploration was that the process of painting these energetic pieces was in fact, a form of energy healing itself.

*I am sitting in front of my creative workspace, an old dining room table that I commandeered for my painting surface. I have been working on a commission for my friend Sarah<sup>26</sup>: a large vertical watercolour that will represent her own individual chakras. I have been working on it in small increments stealing small moments of time between meeting the needs of my family. Each time I paint, my process is the same. I begin by sitting with both of my feet on the floor and I close my eyes, grounding myself and bringing my focus and attention to the painting that I am about to do. It is exactly like the grounding process I use in my healing work*

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<sup>25</sup> The word chakra is a Sanskrit term that means wheel or disc and it implies a circular, moving form. The chakras are energetic centres that reside within (and outside) the human body and they are understood to aid in our transformation towards an enlightened state of being. Traditionally the seven major chakras within the human body are represented by the following colours: Muladhara (base chakra): red. Svadhishtana (sacral chakra): orange. Manipura (naval chakra): yellow. Anahata (heart chakra): green. Vishuddha (throat chakra): blue. Ajna (third eye chakra): indigo. Sahasrara (crown chakra): violet. (Johari, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> A pseudonym.

*and with the familiarity of years of engaging in this act, I quickly feel centred and ready to begin. Before I take up my brush, however, I set my intention for this piece of art and the time that I will be engaged in this creative process.*

*With images in my head rather than spoken thoughts, I think about Sarah and I imagine her face. I then reach out towards her and picture a connective energetic line between the two of us, something that ensures I will be capturing her specific individual energy here upon the page. I then set a verbal intention that comes from deep within my heart, words that sound like a prayer or sacred act that resonates throughout my entire being.*

*“Let the energy that flows within this painting inspire and heal,” I whisper to myself, my head bowed and my hands placed in the yogic prayer position as I call out this supplication to the universe around me. I then open my eyes and reach for my paint.*

*The watercolour paper that I prefer to use for these individual chakra paintings is a thick cold pressed grade that is rough and uneven. I like the way that the undulations and bumps in the paper soak up the pigment; it happens quickly right before my eyes and it gives my fine lines a sharp distinctive edge. The coarse texture of my surface also reminds me that I am not fully in control of what the paint will do or where it will flow. I like this unexpected element of working with watercolour; it makes room for the influence of the artwork itself, as if the painting comes alive and co-creates the finished image with me.*

*I have already been working on this commission for a couple of weeks and today I find myself adding the final touches. I have represented each chakra as a spinning circle of flowing lines that utilizes different shades of its particular colour. At the outside of these circles, I have added petals: elements that are included in most traditional representations of these energy centres. As well as being associated with a given colour, each chakra has a specific number of petals that surround it, all of which have a particular meaning. Today I am working on manipura. It is the third chakra that is represented by the colour yellow and lies over the navel region. I need to include ten of these outer petals for this particular chakra but because I have painted this picture in a vertical line each energy centre is resting above the other, therefore there isn't a lot of room for these outer details. Before I pick up my brush, I study what I have already painted and I begin planning where the petals will go so that I can fit them all in. I decide that I need to place five on each side of the chakra and I estimate how big they can be, then I squeeze some cadmium yellow paint onto my palette and dip my brush into the water.*

*Absorbed by the movement of the fine bristles of my brush, I watch how the paint flows effortlessly onto the rough paper, flooding minute valleys and soaking into the surface. I allow the natural movement of my wrist to create the curves and spirals in my outer petals, feeling when each is done rather than thinking about them in a critical, analytical way. When I am finished I sit up straight to consider the finished chakra and in horror, I realize that I have only painted six petals: four short of the required ten. My eyes go wide as I think about the last few minutes that had specifically begun with an intention to paint ten petals. I had measured out the room that I had to work with and decided on how big each petal needed to be and yet, here before me, I had failed to capture the full complement of outer details. Resisting my natural urge to act quickly and irrationally, I put my paintbrush down and I walk away. Before I make a decision about what to do to fix this 'error', I want to think about it and consider what it means.*

*Over the next day as I move about my daily life, I contemplate the painting and the missing outer petals. These thoughts lead me to dwell upon the opening intentions that I set before I began the commission. I always start with a resolution that the painting that I capture will be a representation of the individual's energy. As I ponder this understanding I think back to a conversation that I had with Sarah when she commissioned the painting. As she updated me on the happenings in her life, she filled me in on news she had received from her doctor concerning a stomach complaint she had been experiencing. The lab tests he had ordered had discovered a parasite in her gut: something that she had picked up in her overseas travels nearly ten years ago. With this reflection I realize that the missing outer petals on the manipura chakra (that lies over the navel region) represent the deficient stomach energy that my friend has been living with for the better part of a decade.*

*When I make the connection between the painting and the physical health of my friend, I am a little stunned. Although I purposefully set my intentions to capture the individual energy of the person I am working with, this experience demonstrates to me once more that I still have a quiet thread of self-doubt threading its way through the back of my mind. This experience slams the door on those reservations however, banning them from my conscious thoughts. It also reminds me that I am not alone in creating these paintings. The universal healing energy around me has been as much a part of my artistic process as the paintbrush in my hand. This is when I understand that by going back to the painting to add the absent petals I will be sending energetic healing to my friend Sarah, in particular to her navel chakra. In this instant I comprehend that each time she sees the painting with the full collection of petals, it will send her the healing energy that she needs. I also realize that this is the type of healing work that I am meant to be doing, more so than the hands on work in a traditional clinic setting.*



As I turn my attention inwards and I reflect on what I have discovered with this final story combined with what I uncovered over the last year of writing, I understand what a profound learning experience this entire research journey has been. When I gave myself permission to release my vulnerability and to bear witness to my authentic inner self, I accessed a deep intimate understanding of my own true identity. As I reintegrated my fragmented and silent voices, I experienced deep cathartic healing that came hand in hand with my writing process. As my teachers have taught me, the deepest healing that we can experience comes from within ourselves. And what I have come to understand is that if everything is energy, then our memories, our artwork, our stories and our expression of those tales can be a form of energy healing: the type of healing that comes from the salt of our tears and the core of our bones.



Figure 8: Michelle Flowers, 2014. *Manipura*. [Watercolour and ink].



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